

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE MYSTERY OF THE
SCREAMING FOG





in

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OF THE
SCREAMING FOG**

A call for help leads The Three Investigators to a small and remote desert community on the South Dakota prairie. There, they witness the village being surrounded by a massive fog that terrifies every resident. In addition, what comes with the fog are eerie screams and huge creatures terrorizing the houses. Many residents have already fled the place. Jupiter, Pete and Bob set out to investigate the mystery behind the fog... only to lead to a massive discovery of a secret.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Screaming Fog

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Translated, adapted, and edited from:
Die drei ??? und der schreiende Nebel
(The Three ??? and the Screaming Fog)

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(2011)

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(2021-09-04)

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1. A Call for Help

"I'm curious to know what could be so important that you had to urgently call us away from all other activities, Jupe." Puffing, Bob Andrews sank into an armchair.

"I'd like to know that too," Pete Crenshaw joined in, pointing demonstratively at his soiled jeans. "I was just in the Robinsons' garden mowing the lawn and you know how badly I need this holiday job."

"Yes, I know that," Jupiter Jones replied, handing his friends two large glasses of Coke. "There is indeed important news that requires quick discussions."

"And this has to be in this stuffy trailer of all places?" asked Bob indignantly. "It's beautiful sunny weather outside!"

In fact, the heat was oppressive in the secret headquarters of The Three Investigators. The old mobile home trailer lay hidden under a mountain of scrap metal and for outsiders, this was indistinguishable from the rest of the junk in The Jones Salvage Yard.

"Distraction sometimes comes at a price," Jupe explained as he turned the large fan up to its highest setting. "But I agree that we shouldn't make the discussion unnecessarily long. So let's start right away..."

He pulled out an opened envelope from which he took out a handwritten piece of paper. "Earlier today, a most peculiar letter arrived in the mail from South Dakota... and it's from none other than Arnold Brewster!"

"Professor Brewster?" Bob exclaimed and Pete opened his eyes in amazement.

Arnold Brewster was a retired ethnologist whom The Three Investigators had helped some time ago to escape the attempted incapacitation of his nephew Clifford and the devious intrigue of a criminal lawyer. At that time, their search for the missing professor had taken them as far as the mountain wilderness of Comina. Since their spectacular adventure then, they had not had contact with the go-getting explorer.

"And what does he want?" asked the Second Investigator.

Jupiter handed the letter to his colleagues. "Read it for yourselves. I'm curious of what you think of it."

Bob took the letter and read it aloud:

Fort Stockburn, Meade County, South Dakota

Hi guys, sorry to barge in, but in the current situation I don't know what else to do but ask for your help.

A lot has happened since our adventure together. After reconciling with Clifford and rebuilding my reputation, I have fortunately been able to resume my old life. Since then, I have been guest lecturing at conferences and universities as before.

At the moment, I am writing a book on the cultural heritage of the primitive peoples of the Americas. To be able to work in peace, I have retreated to the seclusion of South Dakota. I have known the small village of Fort Stockburn since a research trip in the seventies. The peace and quiet in the middle of the boundless prairie is simply wonderful... or rather, it was wonderful. However, recently, disaster has befallen us. A terrible fog keeps descending on the place and terrorizing the residents. The police think

our plight is a fantasy and refuse to investigate. We are left completely on our own here and the terrible events continue on.

It is hard for me to put it all into words, but one thing is certain—this fog is not just an ordinary one. Something horrible is lurking in it and attacking us. Many residents can no longer stand the constant fear and had fled. If this continues, this place will soon be a ghost town.

Therefore, I invite you to come to Fort Stockburn and see for yourselves what is going on. I have enclosed three plane tickets for you from Los Angeles to Rapid City. Since I want to remain here, a taxi driver will pick you up at the airport. Everything is already organized.

Believe me, I know how absurd my descriptions must sound, but I give you my word of honour that it is all true.

*Sincerely,
Arnold Brewster*

Bob looked up in surprise. “That’s really intense...”

Pete swallowed. “A horrible fog that attacks people? He can’t be serious!”

“Now I think you understand why I wanted to talk to you so quickly,” Jupiter replied seriously and he pointed to the desk. “Well, Mr Brewster has to be serious by enclosing airline tickets booked for tomorrow. Besides, he wouldn’t joke with something like that.” He sighed. “Unfortunately, the professor didn’t give us a phone number, so we can’t call him. I tried to contact his niece Marie earlier, but without success.”

“She’s pretty stressed out at the moment,” Bob replied. “I happen to know from a colleague of my father’s that Marie’s husband Martin is in the middle of finishing his doctorate at Ruxton University. The oral exam is probably coming up. He’s been working towards it all his life, and now, of course, she’s doing all she can to support him.”

Martin Ishniak, Mr Brewster’s former assistant, had also been involved in the turbulent adventure in Comina. Because of his Indian ancestry, he had repeatedly had to fight prejudice and ill-will during his studies. But thanks to his iron will, he had never wavered from his great goal.

“Understandably, in such a crucial situation, Mr Brewster would not want to risk worrying Martin and jeopardizing his doctoral examination,” Jupiter said. “That’s why he turned to us.”

“I’d also like to be in an important exam right now...” Pete murmured softly.

At that moment, the telephone rang. After Jupiter had switched on the loudspeaker, he answered the call. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“This is Arnold Brewster,” a creaky voice announced.

“Mr Brewster!” replied Jupe delightedly. “How nice that you were able to make a call after all.”

“Excuse me—could you please speak a little louder? The connection is terribly bad. It’s a miracle I got through at all.” There was considerable crackling and static on the line that it was difficult for Jupiter to hear Mr Brewster.

“I said that we were pleased to receive your call,” Jupiter replied with effortless clarity.

“Oh...” Arnold Brewster seemed unsettled for a brief moment. “Then... you have already received my letter. I was hoping to reach you beforehand so you wouldn’t read the nonsense in the first place.”

“Nonsense?” Pete groaned, dumbfounded.

“Is there anyone else there?” the professor asked suspiciously.

Jupiter gave the Second Investigator a stern look. “Excuse me, sir, my two colleagues Pete and Bob are listening in.”

“Hi, Mr Brewster!” shouted Bob from behind as he grabbed a pen to take notes.

“Uh... what do you mean by ‘nonsense’?” Jupe continued.

Mr Brewster heaved a long sigh. “I have a confession to make, boys. I’ve been having some stressful moments with my neighbours here at Fort Stockburn lately. Well, and that’s why... I guess I’ve had a little too much to drink now and then.”

The First Investigator exchanged an irritated look with his friends. “I don’t quite follow you, sir.”

“It’s about the letter I wrote to you—the fog, the terrible screams and all that. Some of the neighbours just played a dirty trick on me. For them, I’m still the bookworm from the big city who has no idea about prairie life. That’s why they wanted to scare me... and... in my drunken state, I thought it was real.”

“But you wrote that many other residents were also frightened and had taken flight,” Jupiter objected, puzzled.

“Oh, they’re all back by now,” the professor replied hastily. “I told you—they just wanted to get one over on me with all this nonsense. Anyway, everything is fine now and you can throw my letter into the waste basket.”

“Are you really sure about that?” the First Investigator enquired. “After all, you sent us three plane tickets.”

“So what?” replied Brewster gruffly. “It’s my money, isn’t it? Surely I don’t have to justify myself to you brats if I withdraw my offer! In any case, we don’t need you here, understand?” Then he hung up abruptly.

For a moment, there was speechless silence at Headquarters.

Bob energetically crossed his arms. “Brats? There’s no way that was Professor Brewster! He wouldn’t have spoken to us in that tone of voice!”

“And then the alcohol thing,” Pete added, shaking his head. “That doesn’t suit him at all.”

“Equally serious were the inconsistencies in the caller’s content,” the First Investigator noted. “For one thing, he mentioned screams, which he claimed to have described in his letter.”

“That’s right, the letter did not have anything about that,” Pete agreed.

Jupe nodded. “Even more striking was his final sentence: ‘We don’t need you here’.”

“You’re right!” exclaimed Bob, glancing at his notebook. “At first he was still talking about how he was an outsider in Fort Stockburn, who the residents wanted to scare. And then at the end, he suddenly said ‘we don’t need you here’ as if he was now part of the community.”

“And that’s what could have happened,” Jupiter concluded, “when someone overheard Arnold Brewster wanting to call us for help. To prevent that, he called us, pretended to be the professor and tried to cancel the offer.”

“And because of the bad line, we didn’t notice the hoax right away,” Pete added. “With the static, even Aunt Mathilda could have pretended to be Mr Brewster.”

At that moment, the phone rang again. Again, the First Investigator switched on the loudspeaker and picked up the handset.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking... Hello?” But no one answered. At first, the boys thought it was the fake Mr Brewster again because of the soft hissing sound.

But then they realized that it was not a technical noise, but the sound of wind, as if the caller was in the wild.

Jupiter tried again. “Hello! Who is this?”

Instead of an answer, a second sound now mingled with the wind—at first only subliminal and barely audible, then more and more distinct.

Bob’s fingers gripped his pen so tightly that the knuckles stood out white. “Those... those are screams!”

2. Warning from South Dakota

The First Investigator's eyes narrowed. "Yes... Someone is screaming or... something. In any case, it seems to be several voices."

"Nobody screams like that!" hissed Pete nervously.

In fact, the hideous, drawn-out screams were unlike anything the boys had ever heard before. A moment, it sounded like the deep roars of bears, and in the next moment, they were more like the guttural howls of wolves. There was nothing suffering or fearful in them, but something deeply disturbing and threatening... and the sound came closer.

Jupe's expression took on a determined look. "Hello? I don't know what you're trying to pull, but I'm going to hang up now! Did you—"

Before he could finish the sentence, a hoarse murmur suddenly drowned out the distant screams.

"Kaonspeeeeeee..."

Then it clicked and the call was ended.

"What... was that?" asked Pete worriedly.

Hesitantly, the First Investigator hung up. "I haven't the faintest idea." He rubbed the root of his nose thoughtfully. "Did any of you understand that strange word?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "It sounded something like 'chaos', but I'm not sure."

"No," Pete objected. "There was definitely a long note at the end that sounded like an 'e'."

"I wonder if it was that fake Brewster again?" Bob pondered as he sat down at the computer. "Perhaps it's another intimidation manoeuvre to keep us away?"

Restlessly, Pete played around with his empty glass. "And what if the whole thing wasn't a manoeuvre, but... real?"

"Really?" Jupiter raised his left eyebrow in amusement. "You mean there were some monsters screaming?"

"It sure sounded like it," Pete grumbled irritably. "If that's what's waiting for us in South Dakota, I'm not too keen on seeing it live."

In the meantime, Bob had started to do a little search on the Internet. "Well, I can't find anything about screaming fogs, but at least there's an entry about Fort Stockburn."

Curious, Jupiter looked over at him. "What's that?"

"It's not much. That place is just too insignificant. If the information here is correct, Fort Stockburn is a tiny settlement on a vast prairie plain in Meade County. It grew out of a former cavalry base in 1892."

"Hence the unusual name Fort Stockburn," Jupe concluded.

"Exactly. The fort was named in honour of General Russell Stockburn." Bob scrolled down a little. "Meade County is the largest county in South Dakota, and an extremely arid one at that—only 0.3 percent of the area is covered by water. The population is so sparse that statistically there are only about ten people per square kilometre in Meade County. Well, that's all the information I have."

Pete groaned softly. "A prairie village in the middle of nowhere. Very tempting..."

Jupiter looked at the list with a frown. "We will probably have to adjust to quite rustic conditions so we shouldn't necessarily expect Internet access or mobile phone coverage."

"Luckily we still have our trusty walkie-talkies," Bob replied.

"We also need a compass and maps of the area for each of us," Pete added.

"Absolutely right, Pete," Jupiter agreed.

"Best to wear cowboy hats too against the scorching sun," Bob suggested. "Now in summer it can get extremely hot in South Dakota..."

As the holidays had just begun, Jupiter, Pete and Bob managed to get permission from their families for the trip without any major difficulties. After all, Professor Brewster was a trustworthy person of respect and the flight had been organized and paid for. Since Pete's father had business in Los Angeles the next day, he agreed to drop the trio off at the airport in the morning.

At 9:30 the next morning, the boys entered the impressive departure hall of the Los Angeles International Airport. After checking in, they went to Terminal 3 with their boarding passes. There, a friendly service employee, who, according to her name tag, bore the sonorous name 'Bianca Birdsong', had a message ready.

"Jupiter Jones? You have a message forwarded to us."

"Thank you very much." Surprised, Jupiter accepted the envelope and opened it while Bob and Pete looked over his shoulder. The message inside had no sender and consisted of only six words:

Stay away. The Topards are unstoppable.

"Topards?" Pete snapped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Good question," Bob muttered. "One thing is for sure—we are absolutely not welcome at Fort Stockburn."

"At least not with certain residents," Jupe specified with a sombre expression.

A little later, the passenger call sounded and they went on board. They had three adjacent seats, of which Jupiter chose the seat by the window. Since the flight from Los Angeles to Rapid City, including a stopover in Denver, would take about four and a half hours, Bob had prepared some material. Shortly after take-off, he took out his notebook and leafed through it.

"On a special website about the history of Meade County, I discovered some more information about this place. Wait..." He unfolded a computer printout. "So, after the base was abandoned in 1892, some officers and soldiers retired. They stayed there with their families and founded a new settlement together, which continued to bear the name of the fort. Their livelihood was farming and cattle breeding."

"Sounds like a really hard life," the Second Investigator noted, frowning.

"It was," Bob confirmed. "Of course, this life in the wilderness had nothing to do with the comforts of East Coast towns. But it was only through such pioneers that settlement of the West became possible."

"Such prairie dwellers must have developed quite a tough shell," Pete noted.

"That's certainly true of Fort Stockburn, where the residents have always been on their own." Bob glanced at his notes again. "They supported themselves by their own crops, their own livestock and their own water by means of groundwater wells. These wells were used to feed the tank of a water reservoir up until the sixties. Only then were electricity, gas and

water pipes laid to Fort Stockburn. Before that, power was supplied exclusively by generators, which can still be used in emergencies. You really can't get more independent than that."

Jupiter gazed thoughtfully down through the aircraft window at the brilliant white cloud cover. "An island of civilization in a prairie sea."

"A really apt comparison," Bob replied. "But it's an island that keeps shrinking. The younger generation has now completely migrated to the surrounding cities."

"I wouldn't stand it in the wasteland either," Pete admitted.

"Fort Stockburn is from a time of decline," Bob replied, nodding. "In the mid-seventies, there were still over a hundred and twenty people living in the village. Now only about a third of them are left and none of them are under sixty. They are the last of the old guard, so to speak."

"A commune of senior farmers," Jupiter murmured. "I can't wait to see how they react to us young whipper-snappers..."

3. Fort Stockburn

When The Three Investigators stepped out of the plane at the Rapid City Regional Airport, they felt as if they were suddenly wrapped in hot sheets. After the pleasantly air-conditioned flight, the abrupt change to the scorching afternoon heat was all the more extreme. Hastily, the boys followed the other passengers into the much cooler airport hall. After collecting their luggage, they went to a souvenir shop as planned to get several detailed maps and three wide-brimmed cowboy hats.

Waiting in the hall at the exit was a grossly overweight moustachioed man with hulking features and a 'Sioux Falls Stampede' shirt that was clearly too tight. The symbol of this ice hockey team, a mighty buffalo, was alarmingly elongated over his enormous belly and now rather resembled a scrawny dachshund. In his hand, the man held a small cardboard sign that read 'The Three Investigators'.

The First Investigator raised his hand to greet him. "Good day, sir! We are The Three Investigators. Mr Brewster sent you, right?"

"Yeah," the fat man mumbled and carelessly dropped the sign on the floor. "You've chosen a pretty dumb name for yourselves. Are you a comedy troupe?"

"Uh... something like that," Jupiter replied, not feeling like explaining the meaning of their detective agency to this ill-tempered mountain of flesh. "It's best we leave right away so we can get to our performance on time. You probably know the way, Mister..."

"Daggett," the man muttered, gesturing with his broad thumb behind him towards the exit. "Well, let's go."

On the way out, Bob whispered in the Second Investigator's ear: "I never knew there were such friendly walruses in South Dakota."

The trio followed Mr Daggett across the heat-shimmering car park to a battered yellow taxi, whose boot could only accommodate all the luggage with the driver's crude assistance. Since none of the boys wanted to sit shoulder to shoulder with the sweaty ruffian, they squeezed into the back seat. They gratefully registered that the car had a well-functioning air conditioner. However, the pervasive smell of fast food and fried onions was a real imposition.

Wordlessly, Daggett popped a huge piece of green chewing gum into his mouth, turned a country music station to full volume and hit the accelerator.

After they left Rapid City behind and the vegetation gradually became sparser, Jupe finally broke the silence. "Have you been to Fort Stockburn before or is this your first trip there?"

"Got an aunt there. She must have recommended me to your Mr Boozer."

"Brewster," Bob corrected.

"Fine by me. Anyway, I know the place from before... but I haven't been there for ages." He rolled down the side window and noisily spat out the chewing gum slush. "That's where the coyotes say goodnight..."

Very soon, they had left civilization far behind. Under a steel-blue sky, a seemingly endless prairie spread out, dotted with shrub-covered hills. After an hour and a half of driving under an annoying continuous country drizzle, they had finally reached their destination.

Mr Daggett had not exaggerated—Fort Stockburn was really not much more than a collection of perhaps three dozen wooden houses, all of which seemed to date back to the days of the Wild West. On the west side, remnants of the fort's old palisade protruded from the ground. Only two old pick-up trucks and an off-road vehicle standing in an open shed did not really fit into the picture. On the southern side, the investigators saw two stables and a huge barn, adjoined by a paddock with several horses. Behind them stretched a huge yellow shining wheat field, which was obviously about to be harvested. A little away from it, several cattle were grazing in a fenced pasture. In contrast, no one from the village's residents was yet to be seen.

Daggett stopped about fifty metres from the first house.

"Can't you drive us straight to the village?" asked Pete in amazement.

"Can do. But I don't feel like meeting Aunt Grace. She's more annoying than a bladder infection and on top of that she's clingy like a limpet since she split up with her husband."

He rolled down the side window again and spat another piece of chewing gum outside. However, he made no effort to get out of the car and help unload the luggage.

"It's your choice," he grumbled and lit a menthol cigarette with relish. "Either you get out now or you go back to Rapid with me."

Daggett had barely finished the sentence before The Three Investigators had already got out of the car and rushed to the boot. Less than ten seconds later, they were standing between their luggage lying around, watching the Ford speeding away.

"No one will get me in that taxi again," Pete announced in disgust. "We'll smell like rancid French fry grease for a week now! I'd rather ride a horse back..."

"Just arrived and already the three cowboys want to ride back?" asked a sonorous voice behind them.

Surprised, the boys looked around and saw the smiling face of a white-haired man who had pulled out a straw hat in greeting.

"Mr Brewster!" exclaimed Jupiter joyfully, also taking off his cowboy hat. "How nice to see you again!"

"The pleasure is all mine," the professor replied, shaking the investigators' hands vigorously. "I had known you were coming from a distance." He pointed to the clearly visible cloud of dust kicked up by the taxi. "Why didn't Mr Daggett stay a little longer, then? His aunt will be very disappointed."

"Oh, er—the good Mr Daggett had to go straight back to Rapid City, I'm afraid," Bob explained.

"My guess is an acute cheeseburger emergency," Pete murmured softly.

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it." Mr Brewster turned around. "Well, come with me for now. You're probably pretty thirsty after your long journey, aren't you?"

"You bet!" announced Jupiter gratefully, while Bob and Pete reached for their suitcases.

The professor did not choose the direct route, but first took The Three Investigators on a short tour of the village and told them who lived in which house. There was still no one to be seen, but the boys had the dull feeling that numerous eyes were staring at them from behind the curtains.

"Where is everybody?" asked Bob finally.

"In the heat of the afternoon, most people stay indoors," the professor explained. "Besides, people here are decidedly suspicious. When you live so far away from the metropolises, you have a basic scepticism about everything that comes from the 'big city'."

"And by 'big city' you probably mean anything outside Fort Stockburn," Bob guessed.

Mr Brewster smirked. "I see you've got it."

Now they passed the large fountain that stood in the centre of Fort Stockburn. Bent over its rim was a gaunt, hollow-cheeked man with a dishevelled grey goatee, quietly muttering to himself as he turned the crank. Despite the heat, he wore a shapeless fur hat with ear flaps.

"Well?" wondered Pete. "Someone must have got the season wrong. Besides, I thought there was running water here."

The professor lowered his voice. "This is Hank Tornby. He's a little whimsical and refuses to use tap water."

Now the bearded man had noticed the arrivals and Mr Brewster tapped the brim of his hat in greeting. Tornby, however, only narrowed his eyes angrily and grumbled even more vehemently.

"This Mr Tornby doesn't seem to think much of our visit," Jupiter observed.

"You can't expect any cordialities from Hank. He sees a big conspiracy behind everything that comes from outside."

"A conspiracy?" asked Jupiter in surprise. "How can we understand that?"

"Hank Tornby has it in his head that the government is spying on all citizens and trying to influence them by any means possible—radio waves, satellite beams, substances in drinking water and so on. That's why Hank doesn't own a radio or television, doesn't drink tap water and has 'secured' his entire house with foil."

Bob grinned. "And the cap is probably for his protection from the dangerous rays, right?"

"That's right," Mr Brewster replied, "but don't worry, he's basically harmless."

"That will have to be sorted out..." Jupe murmured softly.

The professor pointed to the right to a flat house with an old-fashioned rocking chair on the verandah. "So, now I'll quickly tell Miss Daggett not to wait for her nephew."

He climbed the two steps to the verandah and was about to reach for the handle when the door opened. A heavyset lady with a snow-white bun and a turquoise gown stepped out of the house and started a tremendous torrent of words.

"Professor, it's you, I thought it was my dear Jerry, he wanted to come and see me, but he's probably got too many jobs again, poor thing. Yes, well, being one of the best taxi drivers in the county has its downsides, of course. Word of such customer friendliness spreads like wildfire, so Aunt Grace mustn't be angry that her little Jerry sparrow hardly has any time left."

Bob looked irritated at his colleagues. "She can't be talking about our sweaty whale and his mobile fryer, can she?"

At that moment, Grace Daggett caught sight of The Three Investigators and eyed them intently. The small nickel glasses on her pointed nose reflected the glaring sunlight. Then a smile spread across her roundish face and she darted surprisingly nimbly towards the boys.

"So you are the professor's guests who want to investigate this bad haunting... very pleased to meet you. I've heard that you have experience with such things. That's really fabulous! But be sure to stay away from the old barn—it's dilapidated and needs to be repaired. See you later then, and welcome to Fort Stockburn!"

And she disappeared back into the house.

"Well, that was a complete contrast to Mr Tornby," Jupiter noted, "in pretty much every respect."

A few steps further, they reached their destination and the professor opened the massive door. The interior of the house looked much more comfortable than the weathered exterior suggested. The large windows combined with the light wood to create a friendly atmosphere.

Mr Brewster first led the boys into the living room, which was dominated by a massive stone fireplace. Bob was spontaneously reminded of a log cabin from old Western TV shows.

The large-format art print of a cowboy painting by the painter Frederic Remington and the old shotgun on the wall underlined this impression.

In the corner, a mighty grandfather clock ticked, rising almost to the ceiling. At the end of a narrow corridor was the small but relatively modern bathroom.

After freshening up a little, The Three Investigators went back to the living room. There, the professor offered his guests to sit down on the rustic leather sofa. He then served iced lemonade and took a seat in a comfortable wicker chair.

"I am deeply grateful to you guys for coming. I really didn't know what else to do." He exhaled deeply. "At first I had turned to Marie and Martin, but because of his important exam..."

"We know about it and can completely understand their priorities," Jupiter replied with a smile.

The professor returned the smile, but then became serious again. "Fort Stockburn means a lot to me. Until recently, this was one idyll, full of peace and quiet."

"How exactly did you discover this tiny place?" asked Bob. "In your letter you mentioned a research trip."

The professor nodded. "In 1976, I was a member of an archaeological team that was active in Meade County to research historical sites from the time of the Sihásapa Indians. We started several expeditions from Sturgis into the surrounding area and one day, by chance, we also stopped at Fort Stockburn. I immediately fell in love with this unspoiled place and its people." The hint of a smile flitted across Mr Brewster's tired face. "It wasn't necessarily mutual, though. For the residents, we were more troublemakers than guests."

"But at some point you were accepted?" asked Pete.

"Let's put it this way—they more or less accepted our presence for a week without complaint. The only one who was really happy about our visit was Frank Malvey." Professor Brewster pointed to a photograph on the wall showing a friendly looking man and an old woman. "That's him, with his mother Ethel, many years ago."

He turned again. "Frank took a great interest in our research and helped us explore the area. Over time, the two of us became real friends. That was certainly due to the fact that he himself was as much of an oddball as I was—a lovable oddball with whom I was friends for more than thirty years."

"From your words, I conclude that Mr Malvey has since passed away," Jupiter concluded.

"Yes, four months ago. I was surprised when a notary from Rapid City informed me that Frank had left me his house and land. His mother was long dead, he no longer had a family and there was no one in Fort Stockburn he wanted to leave his bequest to. In his will, he wrote that I was the only one worthy of his estate. Given his meagre living conditions, it was a rather strange decision."

"Indeed," Jupiter agreed, frowning.

"And there was one more thing that puzzled me," the professor continued. "The will was quite concise and matter-of-fact—except for one strangely flowery line that didn't quite fit in there." He thought for a moment, then remembered the sentence:

"Soon, the hour strikes for me to leave. I bid you farewell, my friend... The steady drop of time will always connect us together."

"'Steady drop of time'?" Pete wondered. "Sounds really strange."

“Well, anyway. Since I wanted to retire to work on my book, I decided to come here three weeks ago. It was just ideal conditions for writing.” He gestured to the window. “Out here you can completely—”

Suddenly the professor faltered and his eyes widened. “Oh no!”

Surprised, The Three Investigators looked outside. About two hundred and fifty metres away, a dense white wall of fog billowed over a hill.

4. Phase One

Jupiter jumped up. “Quick! I have to see this up close!”

Together they rushed outside. Other residents had now also stepped out of their houses and looked over at the fog, which stood out ghostly against the deep blue sky. Next to Hank Tornby and Miss Daggett, who was holding an excitedly panting sheepdog on a leash, stood a broad-shouldered man in his late sixties with a bald head and precisely trimmed silver-white moustache. He wore a light linen shirt, blue uniform trousers and heavy riding boots. His right hand clasped a mighty sabre, its blade flashing in the sun. No one moved, however.

“Phase One,” Hank Tornby croaked softly as he nervously stroked the stock of a double-barrelled shotgun.

“Why isn’t anyone coming?” asked Jupe uncomprehendingly as he walked towards the distant hill with his colleagues and Mr Brewster.

“They know it’s pointless,” the professor explained, puffing. “It always starts this way. First the fog shows itself from a long distance away, as if it wants to intimidate us. By the time you reach there, it disappears. Then a few hours pass until it suddenly reappears and descends upon the place.”

“The screams!” cried Bob. “Do you hear that?”

A horrible scream now rang out from the depths of the fog and grew louder and louder. But it happened just as the professor had predicted. When Pete, the fastest of them, was only a stone’s throw away, the white veil evaporated and the screams died away. Shortly afterwards, they had all reached the hill and looked around.

“Nothing,” the Second Investigator stated incredulously. “No fog, no traces, nothing at all.”

Shaking his head, Jupiter walked around in a circle a few times, poking the earth with one finger and stamping his foot firmly several times. “There is indeed nothing to find here. Most astonishing...”

As they turned around and walked back towards Fort Stockburn, the place looked like a mirage in the shimmering air, which just like the fog, could disappear from the face of the earth in the next second.

The residents had retreated back into their houses. Nothing was stirring, not a bird could be seen in the sky. All that was missing was a tumbleweed bush rolling around to make the impression of boundless loneliness complete.

Since the screams had stopped, a leaden silence lay over the land. Despite the desert temperatures, goose bumps ran down Pete’s spine. After the ghastly screams, this complete dead silence seemed all the more eerie. It seemed to him as if someone had put a huge soundproof glass over them, under which the heat was accumulating like in a huge greenhouse—heat and fear.

Shortly afterwards they were all sitting together again in the professor’s living room, refreshing themselves with a new jug of lemonade. Mr Brewster now looked very tense.

“It’s all so unbelievable. This fog... is destroying Fort Stockburn.” He sighed softly. “There are so few of us left here anyway. And since the incidents began, several died.”

residents have chosen to leave—specifically, twenty-five of us, in the past few days. If this madness doesn't stop, the rest will soon give up as well."

Jupiter looked at the professor sympathetically. "Mr Brewster, we are determined to get to the bottom of these events. But to do that we need more details. Tell us how it all began."

"That was ten days ago. I had just about halfway managed to gain the trust of the people here when the fog appeared for the first time." Mr Brewster sighed again. "Some here are therefore of the opinion that I brought disaster on Fort Stockburn."

"That's complete nonsense," Jupiter replied.

"Of course it is," the professor agreed. "But in emergencies, people just look for a tangible outlet for their fear."

The professor rose, went to a bulky desk and opened a drawer from which he took a slim folder. He returned with it and handed Jupiter a dirty map of Rapid City. "I found this outside my house the morning after the first fog incident. It was weighted down with a stone."

Carefully, Juve unfolded the map and his friends gathered to look at the piece of paper. Surprised, The Three Investigators saw that Rapid City airport had been circled in red paint. Underneath it said: 'Departure!'

"That's clear," Pete murmured.

"Four days later, the fog appeared for the second time. Shortly afterwards, I discovered this outside." The professor took a Polaroid photo from the folder. The photograph showed Mr Brewster's door with 'Guilty!' written in big red letters.

"Not very subtle," Jupiter commented.

"Definitely not," Mr Brewster agreed. "Then after the third incident, it became even clearer." He handed the boys another photograph showing the back of the house. On the wooden façade was written, again in blood-red letters: 'Get out!'

"That's what I call unequivocal," Bob stated. "But you didn't let that affect you."

Mr Brewster let himself sink back into the wicker chair. "It may sound nonsensical, but I simply feel obliged to my friend Frank not to give up this house and this place."

"Do you have any suspicions about who might be behind this?" asked Pete.

"No, there are just too many for that." Mr Brewster looked out of the window gloomily. "I can't even blame the person or persons. I've already told you that everyone here is very suspicious, so of course, I seem all the more suspicious to them as a stranger." He made an expansive hand gesture. "No one here has ever experienced anything like that. In itself, after all, fog is nothing unusual or threatening. Even in an arid area like this, light ground fog occasionally occurs... but this is something completely different."

"How exactly did the first time go?" Bob wanted to know.

The professor again let his restless gaze wander. "It began quite innocently when the captain sighted an unusually dense white fog on the horizon one morning."

"The captain?" asked Jupiter in amazement.

"Patrick Hold," Mr Brewster replied. "A former Army officer and ardent admirer of the cavalry tradition. His great-grandfather was the commanding officer of Fort Stockburn. You saw Mr Hold earlier, by the way, alongside Grace Daggett."

"Oh, that dashing guy with the big sabre," Pete concluded.

Mr Brewster smiled. "That's right. Everyone just calls him the captain. If it wasn't so hot, he'd probably be wearing his great-grandfather's cavalry uniform right now too. He's kind of like the sheriff around here and always keeps a watchful eye on everything."

"How far away was the fog?" asked Pete.

"Significantly further than before, perhaps a little less than a kilometre, but to the north. After we had almost forgotten about the captain's sighting in the morning, the fog suddenly

appeared in Fort Stockburn at around noon, without any warning. It was simply there, enclosing the whole place. The fog was so thick that you couldn't see two metres away. And then these horrible screams started. I've never heard anything like it before."

At that moment, Bob noticed a quick movement at the window out of the corner of his eye. Reflexively, he threw his hands in front of his face.

"Look out!"

5. Strangers Unwanted

Before the others could react, there was a deafening crash and the window shattered into a thousand pieces. Upset, the professor rushed to the shattered window, followed by The Three Investigators. Far and wide there was no one to be seen. While Pete turned on his heel and ran for the front door, Mr Brewster bowed his head in bewilderment.

“When will they realize that I’m not responsible?”

Concerned, Jupiter put a hand on his shoulder. “Whoever did this—if he’s still out there, Pete will find him. Come on, we’ll help you clean up this mess.”

The professor nodded slowly. “You’re right, I have to keep my nerve.” He went into the adjoining kitchen and returned with a broom and a large bucket. Just as Bob started sweeping up, the Second Investigator came back into the living room.

“No one to be seen...” Pete reported, “but the houses are so close together it could have been anyone. Just now this Mr Hold came out and looked over at us.”

As if in confirmation, the captain’s bald head, gleaming in the sun, appeared at the smashed window. “What happened here?”

Miss Daggett also rushed over and pushed herself next to Mr Hold. “Oh my goodness, that beautiful window!” she exclaimed. “No one’s hurt, I hope.”

“No, no, it’s all right,” Mr Brewster soothed. “A stupid mishap, that’s all.”

“That’s all right then,” Captain Hold commented curtly. His raised eyebrow, however, revealed that he doubted the professor’s words.

Meanwhile, Miss Daggett had poked her fat head further into the living room and was looking around curiously in all directions. Her jerky movements were reminiscent of an excited chicken pecking around. “If you need help cleaning up, I’ll be happy to come in and...”

“That’s really not necessary, thank you very much, Miss Daggett,” the professor rebuffed.

After a last searching look, the captain turned and explained to the other neighbours that nothing bad had happened. As if on a silent command, the people disappeared back into their homes. Grace Daggett too, after a friendly but unmistakable wave from Mr Brewster, allowed herself to be convinced that she could safely leave.

In the meantime, Jupiter had noticed spots of paint on the carpet and knelt down in front of the leather sofa. Carefully, he pulled out a red-smeared object. “So here we have the projectile...”

The professor sucked in a sharp breath. “That... is the side mirror of my SUV!”

“Broken off and painted with red paint,” Bob noted.

Jupiter nodded. “Whoever the perpetrator is, he seems to have a pronounced preference for red.”

After checking in the shed that Mr Brewster’s car was otherwise undamaged, they went back into the house and provisionally sealed the window with a sheet of plywood. The professor then led his guests into the cosy kitchen, where he prepared beans with bacon for them in a huge cast-iron pan. This was accompanied by toasted bread.

“How do you actually get your food?” asked Bob with interest. “Or do you really make everything yourself here?”

“A lot of things, but not everything. Miss Daggett has something like a little shop at her house. She goes to Sturgis twice a month in her pick-up truck and does a big collective shopping for anyone who gives her a list. She also picks up the mail. Her husband Dave used to do that, but she was divorced a few months ago.”

“I see,” Pete replied. “Everything has its set procedures.”

“Speaking of procedures,” Jupe spoke up as he gleefully took a bite. “Let’s approach the subject systematically. Even leaving aside the bizarre screams, these events are most peculiar. Fog is formed when warm, moist air cools down near the ground and the gaseous water it contains condenses into fine drops.”

Arnold Brewster smiled. “Your encyclopaedic knowledge still has no limits, right?”

“Endless expanse...” Bob murmured softly.

Flattered, the First Investigator waved it off. “That’s just basic meteorological knowledge.”

“So fog is made up of millions and millions of fine water droplets,” Pete continued.

“Like clouds,” Mr Brewster confirmed.

Jupiter nodded. “Exactly. Basically, fog is nothing more than a cloud that lies close to the ground. The water vapour saturation determines whether it is a light, moderate or heavy fog.”

Bob frowned. “Then our fog here is probably in the heaviest category.”

“Definitely,” Jupiter agreed. “But what is much more unusual is that it occurred for the first time on a summer afternoon. The same goes for the incident just now. Fog, after all, develops when moist air near the ground cools down. That’s why most fog develops in the cold half of the year, mainly in the evening and near bodies of water.”

“That makes sense,” replied Mr Brewster. “During the day, the sun’s rays cause water to evaporate and then be absorbed by the air. In the evening, temperatures drop and the water in the air condenses into fog.”

“Exactly,” confirmed the First Investigator. “It is true that fog can also occur in summer, but only in combination with a sudden burst of cold air or rain. And I don’t think that was the case here.”

“Then, as now, it was consistently hot and dry all day,” Mr Brewster added.

“So this fog shouldn’t exist at all,” Pete concluded.

“From a physical point of view, it is indeed a mystery how this fog is formed,” Jupiter remarked.

Bob pulled out his notebook and flipped to a page. “Before we left, I put together some information. You see, there are many different types of fog, for example radiation fog, advection fog, steam fog, upslope fog, precipitation fog, and freezing fog... but not a single one of them fits into what we saw.”

Pete turned to the professor again. “How did this first incident turn out?”

“Very suddenly. After about five minutes the whole spook was over and the fog disappeared just as quickly as it had come—as if we had only dreamed it all.”

The First Investigator tapped his chin thoughtfully. “If we stick to logic and science, it remains to be said that a natural cause for this fog is almost impossible. That leaves the second possibility of artificial creation.”

“You mean someone is using a smoke machine like in some of our earlier cases?” asked Pete sceptically.

“You can easily buy such party vaporizers,” Jupiter explained.

“If the whole thing was really artificially created, the effort must have been huge to fog all the houses at the same time,” Bob said. “I guarantee you it couldn’t have been done by one person.”

“So several people would have to be involved in such an action,” Jupiter concluded, “which brings us directly to the question of motive. Who in Fort Stockburn should derive any benefit from frightening the residents with such a horror fog?”

Mr Brewster scratched his temple. “I’ve been thinking about that too. There is simply no one who would do it.” He gestured out the window. “I have learnt that this has always been a conspiratorial community. Of course there is friction and disputes now and then but in an emergency, everyone would stand up for the other. After all, they all made the joint decision a long time ago not to follow the younger ones, but to stay here and spend their twilight years at Fort Stockburn.”

“That kind of thing bonds, of course,” Bob murmured.

“There are only a handful left here anyway,” the professor continued, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. “And none of them would go as crazy as this. Besides... that’s not all.”

“What do you mean?” Bob asked.

“This screaming fog is horrible enough, but it’s all made much worse by... what comes with it.”

6. The Monster Fog

Jupiter leaned forward and looked at Mr Brewster encouragingly. "Tell us."

"The second time the fog appeared on the horizon, it was early afternoon. Again, the sighting was only brief. Then at dusk it happened again. I was sitting over there at my desk over my manuscript when I was startled by the terrible screams. Outside the window everything was white... and in the thick plumes... something moved."

"Couldn't that have been one of your neighbours?" Bob wondered.

The professor shook his head vigorously. "No way. I only saw an outline, but the figure was huge, at least two metres tall. It moved past the window in slow and strangely choppy movements. The head seemed hideously deformed and something hung down from its shoulders."

"Now it's getting uncomfortable," Pete murmured softly.

Mr Brewster drank a big gulp of water. "Jim Sesto, our blacksmith, also saw something that evening. When the plumes had cleared and we all gathered at the well, he told us, completely distraught, about terrible big eyes staring at him out of the fog." He wiped his forehead nervously with the back of his hand. "Also, Miss Daggett told us that from the window, she had seen a huge figure with long arms slowly creep past the captain's house and disappear into the fog."

"Most mysterious," Jupiter noted and exhaled deeply.

"The third time, everything got worse," the professor continued. "Until then, there had been unrest and concern in the village, but no one here would have seriously considered leaving. That changed three days ago. In the late afternoon, a wall of fog could be seen—at first again only far away. Since we now knew that the fog would return, some, including the captain, kept vigil. But it was no use."

"What... happened?" asked Pete worriedly.

"In the middle of the night, this terrible screaming began. The fog was so thick that no light could penetrate it. Those who had still been outside retreated into their houses. And then came the attack."

"Attack?" Bob raised his brows in surprise.

"Suddenly there were scratching on the walls and the door. The screaming got louder and louder and there was a huge figure with yellow eyes standing in front of the living room window. I'm really not a coward, but that's when I got scared too."

"Understandable," Jupiter murmured.

"After a few minutes, it was suddenly deadly quiet and shortly after that, the fog went off. I learned from the others that they had also seen the figure. For many of them, this was the limit of what they could bear. Over the course of the next day, sixteen of them left. That was the moment I decided to ask for your help." He sighed. "Then, after another attack yesterday morning, nine more residents left."

"Was it as bad as the time before?" Pete wanted to know.

The professor lowered his eyes. "Worse. This time it wasn't just scratching and scraping, but thumping on the door and walls, as if these... beings wanted to reduce the house to rubble. Only when a shot was fired did they retreat. The captain had fired into the fog. It was

probably a hasty action, because the proximity of the houses makes it far too dangerous to shoot around without sight. He didn't hit anything, at least we didn't discover any blood or other traces after the fog had cleared. Just a few rumpled spots on the ground, nothing else."

Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. "One thing is undoubtedly certain—the incidents increase from time to time. First there was only the screaming fog, then the creatures appeared, but initially kept their distance. Then in the third incident, they attacked the houses for the first time and yesterday they intensified the attack again."

Bob, who had written down some numbers, looked into his notebook with a frown. "Besides, the intervals are getting smaller and smaller. The first incident was ten days ago, the second six, the third three and then the fourth was yesterday."

The First Investigator nodded. "Including today's fog, that was four, three, two and one days apart."

"Like a countdown..." Pete whispered.

Mr Brewster rubbed his wrist nervously. "A real campaign of attrition, further heightened by the recurring pattern. First a distant sighting as an announcement, and then the attack directly on site."

"No wonder many here couldn't take this pressure anymore," Bob countered.

Jupiter took a deep breath and straightened up. "In any case, we have to look at two different areas separately in our investigations. One is the mysterious monster fog and, two, the intimidation against Mr Brewster."

"Right," Bob agreed. "I bet this window attacker is the same person who tried to keep us out of here."

The professor stared in irritation. "What do you mean?"

Together, The Three Investigators reported the two calls and the mysterious message at the airport.

"The Topards are unstoppable?" asked Mr Brewster in amazement. "That doesn't mean anything to me."

"Do you have any guesses as to who might have impersonated you?" asked Pete.

"Unfortunately no. In any case, there are only a few telephone lines in the village, but they are often not working properly." Mr Brewster considered for a moment. "There's Grace Daggett from across the road, then Jim Sesto, Mr and Mrs Jackson, but they left the place two days ago, and me. There was definitely no one at my house, so the person must have called from one of the other houses. Miss Daggett's voice certainly rules her out. That leaves four men besides me and Hank Tornby—the captain, William Prescott, Jim Sesto and Samuel Cobble." He took a lined piece of paper from his waistcoat pocket and unfolded it. "Before you came, I have noted here the remaining residents of Fort Stockburn and a few brief notes for you."

The Three Investigators anxiously skimmed the list:

Captain Patrick Hold (single, approx. 70)
—former Army officer and excellent marksman
—keeps order at Fort Stockburn
—seems to accept my presence
—very concerned about the preservation of history
—contentious and sometimes quite quick-tempered
—Assessment: neutral

Grace Daggett (single, approx. 65)

—divorced from her husband Dave Loomis a few months ago

—has a German shepherd named Rusty

—owns a small shop

—travels regularly to Sturgis

—former nurse; responsible for first aid

—the most open of all the residents; sometimes I even think she has her eye on me

—Assessment: positive

William Prescott (single, approx. 70)

—has the most experience as a farmer; always supervises sowing and harvesting in the field

—shy and reserved

—hard to judge whether he tolerates my presence or whether I am a thorn in his side

—Assessment: rather negative

Samuel Cobble (widower, approx. 80)

—former trapper and excellent hunter

—knows the animal and plant world like no other

—quite quirky, but seems to have a good heart

—Assessment: rather positive

Jim Sesto (single, approx. 60)

—blacksmith; also skilled in electrics

—takes care of all technical problems and repairs in the village

—responsible for the radio in an emergency

—ignores me most of the time

—Assessment: neutral

Hank Tornby (widower, late 60s)

—the strangest of the residents; largely isolated

—believes in a nationwide government conspiracy to influence the population

—often talks to himself and fantasizes about dark forces lurking everywhere

—sees a risk in everything foreign; gets out of my way

—Assessment: negative

“That’s a good basis for our investigation,” Bob praised.

Pete yawned blatantly. “But first I need a good night’s sleep. It’s been quite a day again. That reminds me...” Worried, he looked at the professor. “If a distant fog is always followed by an attack on the place, then...”

“... Then we have to expect another raid,” the professor added seriously. “However, it is impossible to predict exactly when that will be. The intervals so far have varied between three and nine hours.”

“So if we’re unlucky, we’ll experience the next attack in the middle of the night,” Bob muttered with a sombre expression.

“You can look at it one way or the other,” the First Investigator replied. “After all, we are here to investigate this phenomenon... and that means we have to experience the fog firsthand.”

Grumpily, Pete bit into the last slice of bread.

“Then I’ll take the first watch,” Bob offered. He looked over at the large bookshelf. “I’ve got enough reading to keep me awake.”

“Agreed,” the professor said and turned to Jupiter and Pete. “Then you two can get some sleep for now. I don’t have a guest room here, but I’ve improvised a bit.” He gestured to a door on the opposite side. “Since the study is too dark for me, I hardly use it at all. I’ve made up beds there, which I hope will be comfortable enough for you.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Jupe replied with a smile. “As tired as we are, we could sleep on bare concrete.” He turned to Bob. “Please remember to prepare the video camera just in case.”

Bob grinned. “I will... but I want a good shower first!”

7. Phase Two

Pete tossed and turned restlessly in his sleep. In his dream, he was huddled in a glass cage in the middle of an endless prairie. On his head was a shapeless brown fur hat, knotted tightly under his chin. A gigantic white-hot sun burned down from the cloudless firmament. Some distance away stood a massive old-fashioned oven, from which thick white plumes were rising.

Suddenly, a huge chicken the size of a full-grown elephant leapt out from behind a hill and circled the oven with twitching head movements. In its shaggy plumage were dozens of turquoise flowers and on its powerful beak sat a pair of shiny nickel spectacles. In mid-motion, the monster turned abruptly to Pete and chased him with incredible speed. The enormous beak was wide open and horrible screams tore the air. The wildly flapping wings were as big as those of a crop-dusting aeroplane. A heartbeat later, the chicken had arrived at the cage and was screeching around it. Again and again it hacked at the glass with its sabre-like beak.

Tick! Tick! Tick! Tick!

Drenched in sweat, Pete pulled himself up. His pulse was racing. For the first few seconds, he didn't know where he was and fumbled fearfully for his bedside lamp, which of course he couldn't find. Only when his eyes had adjusted a little to the darkness and he recognized the shadowy outline of the sleeping First Investigator, did he remember everything and gradually calm down.

"What a nightmare..." he breathed softly and let his head sink back onto the pillow.

Tick! Tick! Tick! Tick!

The shock hit Pete like a punch. From one second to the next, the fear was back and tightened his throat. He had not dreamed the ticking. There was someone at the window! With trembling hands, he shook Jupiter's shoulder.

"Jupe! Wake up!" he groaned.

Instantly the First Investigator was wide awake. "What's wrong?"

Hectically, Pete pointed to the window. "Out there! There's someone there!"

At that moment, Bob woke up and dim light fell into the room. "Has something happened? I heard you talking."

Instead of an answer, Jupiter put his index finger to his lips. Tensely, the boys listened to the silence, but nothing moved.

Cautiously, the First Investigator got up and crept to the window. He waited a few more seconds and listened, then with a quick jerk he pulled the heavy curtain aside.

"Goodness!" Bob breathed.

In the pale light of the full moon, thick clouds of fog billowed in front of the house, from which suddenly ghastly screams rang out. A loud scratching on the wall made the boys flinch.

"I don't believe it! What's that?" asked Pete, frightened.

Jupiter's facial features hardened. "Whatever this is—it is undoubtedly real."

A deep, menacing growl now mingled with the shrill screams. It was frighteningly close. Once again, a loud scratching sounded along the outer wall just below the ceiling.

“That sounds like the claws of an animal,” Bob muttered, stunned.

Pete backed away into the interior of the room. “What kind of huge animal is that supposed to be?”

Before Jupiter could form a clear thought, thunderous thumps echoed through the house.

“It’s at the front door!” cried Bob in shock.

Again it pounded, this time even more violently and from several sides at once. A second later, the light in the living room went out.

“Jupe, what are we going to do now?” gasped Pete. His heart was beating up to his throat.

The First Investigator also had terror clearly written all over his face. “We... we have to —”

He didn’t get any further, because at that moment the chalk-white professor rushed into the room.

“They’re everywhere!” he cried in shock. “At the bedroom window, at the back, at the front door, just everywhere! What’s more, the electricity is out!”

As if Mr Brewster had flipped an invisible switch in Jupiter’s head, the First Investigator’s clear thinking now kicked back in. “Everybody grab your flashlights! Bob—grab the video camera and switch to night vision mode! Pete, you get the shotgun from the wall in the living room!”

“It’s ancient and I don’t have any ammunition for it!” the professor objected.

“But the attackers don’t know that,” Jupe replied. “Go to the kitchen and find something to defend yourself with. You have that big meat knife! I’ll cover Bob while he takes videos. We’ll try the window next to the front door! Go!”

Immediately, a flurry of activity began. Flashlights were switched on, trousers hastily put on and shoes slipped on. One after the other, they rushed out of the study.

While Mr Brewster was noisily making himself busy in the kitchen, Pete was trying to pull the jammed shotgun out of its holder in the living room. To do so, he propped his left hand against the mighty grandfather clock, but the shotgun just wouldn’t come loose.

With a loud chime, the clock suddenly struck midnight. Pete whirled to the side and froze when he spotted the reflection of a gruesome grimace in the glass of the clock case. Hastily, the Second Investigator turned and staggered back, gasping. The plywood with which they had nailed the window shut in the afternoon had been bashed in and now lay splintered on the floor.

A nightmarish figure swayed, growling, directly in front of the broken window frame, glaring at Pete out of large, yellow-glowing eyes. The creature’s misshapen flat face was covered with thick black fur and long shaggy hair hung down from its body. Greedily, the creature kept stroking its claws over its open, black-smeared mouth, from which pointed fangs protruded.

Without thinking, Pete reached to his right to a hallway dresser where he had left the hair dryer after his shower. He yanked the old-fashioned hair dryer up like a clunky gun and shouted: “H... hands up!”

For a split-second, a cold light flashed in the fog and blinded the Second Investigator. When he had a clear view again, the creature had disappeared. The ghastly screaming had also died away in one fell swoop.

Breathing heavily, Mr Brewster came running, holding a large knife in his right hand. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

Hesitantly, Pete shook his head and pointed to the damaged window. “There... there was a creature out there!”

They heard the front door squeak. Obviously Bob and Jupiter had ventured outside.

“There, now I’ve had enough!” Pete swallowed his fear, turned to the wall again and, with brute force, ripped the shotgun, complete with brass holsters, from its anchorage.

Accompanied by the Professor, the Second Investigator stormed to the open door, shotgun at the ready. In front of the house, Jupiter stood at Bob’s side, panning the spooky scene with his video camera.

The fog had already lifted considerably, revealing a view of the neighbouring houses. At the windows, Pete recognized the faces of Miss Daggett and Captain Hold in the moonlight, staring out in concern. Several windows had been shattered and deep gouges were visible on many walls. The ground was churned up in numerous places and showed strange drag marks.

Only now did Pete notice the gaunt figure of Mr Tornby standing motionless in the middle of the only street in the village. Apart from his fur hat, he was clad only in his pyjamas. He was staring apathetically into space and his lips were quivering.

“Phase Two,” he murmured barely audibly.

8. On the Trail of Horror

After Mr Brewster had checked with the neighbours that no one was injured, he and The Three Investigators made makeshift repairs to the worst of the damage. In the process, they discussed the inconceivable events, the horror of which was still lingering.

After a quick check of the video footage, their fears were confirmed. Apart from the fog and the tracks, nothing useful could be seen. The creatures had already retreated by the time Bob had taken up position with the camera. Since nothing more could be done during the night, they decided around half past one to lie down for a few more hours.

When the boys came into the kitchen the next morning, the professor had already prepared a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, pancakes and toast. He looked at them with pleasure.

“Good morning, you three! Well, did you get some sleep?”

“To be honest, after the night’s events, it was quite difficult to get back to rest,” Bob replied, yawning as he smeared his pancake thickly with maple syrup.

“I felt the same way,” the professor replied. “Every noise startled me and I reached for the knife.” He shook his head in bewilderment. “It just can’t go on like this.”

“Nor will it,” Jupiter said resolutely. “I am convinced that we will clear up this infernal spectacle.”

“Oh yeah?” asked Pete sceptically. “And does our logic genius have any idea what those creatures were?”

“Not yet,” confessed the First Investigator. “Even the traces in front of the house do not allow a clear attribution. I was outside briefly after getting up and looked at everything in daylight. These beings obviously shuffled along, so no clear contours can be seen. The tracks get lost after a few metres in the rest of the tangle of footprints and hoofprints on the road. I did manage to make one small find, though.” With pointed fingers he took a tuft of brown-black hair out of his trouser pocket. “I plucked these hairs from one of the cracks on the wall.”

“May I have a look?” asked Mr Brewster, carefully taking the hairs and examining it closely. “Hmm... I’m not a zoologist, but this does seem to be animal hair.”

“Then we just have to clarify which upright walking, two-metre tall animal with a flat snout and fangs it is,” Pete stated bitingly.

Jupiter took a large spoonful of scrambled eggs. “In order to find the solution to this mystery, we should first conduct a thorough survey of the remaining residents of Fort Stockburn.”

Mr Brewster frowned. “The hardest nut to crack will certainly be Hank Tornby. I’ve wanted to visit him a few times since I arrived, but he’s never let me into his house. I don’t think he’ll make an exception for you.”

“Perhaps the two of you handle him,” Bob suggested. “Meanwhile, I’ll go question the captain.”

The professor nodded. “Good, in the meantime I will ask Mr Sesto to help me repair the window.”

Concerned, the Second Investigator looked over at the damaged window. "The best thing is to ask him if he has shatterproof glass..."

After they had finished breakfast and showered, the boys set off. Jupiter and Pete first had to cross the village to get to Hank Tornby's house, which was a little out of the way and right next to the big barn.

Bob, on the other hand, had only a few steps to walk to Miss Daggett's neighbour. Because of the tall flag pole, the captain's house was easy to find from any position in Fort Stockburn. As Mr Brewster had reported, Mr Hold raised the American flag in a solemn ceremony every sunrise and took it down again at dusk. He always did that with a salute and the blowing of his cavalry bugle.

Now Bob was standing in front of the captain's door. Nervously, he smoothed his hair, took a deep breath and knocked timidly. The response came promptly.

"There's a Smith & Wesson Schofield revolver pointed at the door," a deep grating voice threatened from inside. "And I won't hesitate to make use of it if you do anything foolish, pilgrim."

Bob swallowed hard and tried convulsively to sound calm and polite despite his shock. "I... er... I'm certainly not going to do anything foolish with you, Mr Hold. I just want to..."

"It's Captain Hold and 'sir', got it?" it boomed back.

"Y-yes, Captain, sir, of course, sir," Bob confirmed hastily, cursing under his breath at his decision to take on this trigger-happy veteran.

"Well, get your butt in here, or do you want me to scream my head off?"

"N-no, of course not, sir, then I'll come in now, shall I? P-please don't shoot by mistake."

"Listen to me, you city slicker. I have fired more than ten thousand shots in my life, but not a single one of them by mistake!"

"Very reassuring, sir," Bob murmured, mustering all his courage and pressing the door handle.

At the same time, Juve and Pete arrived in front of Hank Tornby's warped house, from whose roof numerous thin poles protruded like the spines of an oversized hedgehog.

"What's that supposed to be?" asked Pete in amazement.

Juve grinned. "My guess is some kind of sophisticated defence system against dangerous rays from outer space."

Hesitantly, they approached the door, whose frame was covered with strange red and silver foils.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" A croaking high-pitched voice suddenly came from the right.

Irritated, the two investigators turned and saw Hank Tornby, who had obviously just come from the well, carrying a large bucket of water. His face under his thick fur hat shone an angry red in the sun.

"To be honest, we wanted to see you, Mr Tornby," Jupiter replied with a friendly smile.

"Aha!" exclaimed the old man, setting down the bucket and pointing at the two boys with a wagging index finger. "So Phase Three begins now, yes?"

"Phase Three?" asked Pete, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Don't act so hypocritical!" clamoured Tornby. "You don't fool me. You're spying here on behalf of the government! Really clever of them to use such young agents so as not to

arouse suspicion!”

Only now did Jupiter notice that Mr Tornby had raised his left hand and was now sliding it under his waistcoat. Without thinking for long, the First Investigator took two quick steps forward, put his hands on Tornby’s scrawny shoulders and looked him firmly in the eye.

“Sir, I swear to you on my Aunt Mathilda’s cherry pie that we are not here on behalf of the government and have no ill intentions.”

This unusual oath seemed to impress Mr Tornby. He blinked in irritation, as if a fierce wolf had just turned into a harmless hamster before his eyes. Hesitantly, he lowered his left hand.

“You... weren’t sent by the Pentagon?”

“Certainly not, Mr Tornby,” Pete affirmed. “We are friends of Mr Brewster and we want to help solve the sinister incidents here.”

“My, my, my,” the old man breathed and averted his eyes. Shaking his head, he walked around in a circle for a few steps, rubbing his fur hat frantically over and over again. He seemed to be pondering what to do now.

“Completely clueless, the little rascals...” he murmured softly and tugged at his chin beard. Finally he stopped and pointed to his house.

“All right, then, I’ll let you in on it... but not out here. They have their ears everywhere... and if they catch you...” He stared at the boys imploringly. “... You’ll never come back!”

9. Difficulties Getting Information

The captain had led Bob into the kitchen and now, with a silent movement of his head, instructed him to sit down at the large oak table. In a stiff posture, Bob waited for further instructions from the master of the house, who in the meantime had fortunately put the revolver back into its holster on his belt.

“So?” asked Mr Hold finally with a stern look. “What’s your name and what are you doing here?”

Bob tried to manage a tentative smile, but it was difficult for him. “My name is Bob Andrews and if you don’t mind, I’d like to…” He was about to reach for his wallet to pull out a business card, but froze in the movement as the captain’s right hand closed around the grip of the revolver again.

“Take it easy, kid,” Mr Hold murmured threateningly. “Otherwise you’ll have a second belly button to look forward to.”

“I… I just wanted to… show you the business card of our detective agency,” Bob replied. “My friend and I are investigators.” The sweat on his forehead had long since ceased to have anything to do with the oppressive heat.

“Investigators?” the captain rumbled. “You’ve got to be kidding me! You and the other two kids? You want to be investigators? In kindergarten, or what?”

“I… I can understand your scepticism, sir,” Bob replied cautiously, “but we have solved quite a number of cases.” In slow motion, he pulled out his wallet and handed Mr Hold the famous card of The Three Investigators. It said:



“I get it,” Mr Hold growled mockingly, flicking the card casually back to Bob. “I can imagine it vividly—lost hair clips, missing tricycles and so on. But what are you doing here with us at Fort Stockburn?”

“Er… Professor Brewster has asked us to help investigate the fog incidents.”

“There’s nothing to help here!” the captain grumbled angrily. “We’ve always defended ourselves here against all threats—coyotes, droughts, hurricanes, hippies, prairie fires… We certainly don’t need any help from three runaway city kids!”

Bob raised his hand placatingly. “I… I respect your view, of course. We would never dare to doubt your abilities either… but you must admit that this fog is unlike anything you have experienced before, right?”

For a few seconds, Mr Hold was silent and looked gloomily out of the window. Then he gave a loud sigh and put his rough hands on the table.

"The fog wants to destroy us... and it seems unstoppable." He pointed to the wall where several Winchester rifles hung. "What good are bullets if you can't see your opponent? Besides, the houses are so close together that one of us might get hit. This fog is just diabolical."

"Do you... have any idea what all this means?" asked Bob uncertainly.

"Oh yes, I do," Hold replied gloomily. "But what good is that? Nothing can be done against the demons of the past."

Bob was puzzled. "Demons? What do you mean?"

"I've already said far too much," the captain rebuffed. "But you can believe me on one thing—there are things out here that you can't imagine in your worst nightmares. And that's why I advise you to go back to your friends and the professor and leave before it's too late!"

"And... you?" asked Bob uncertainly.

Captain Hold leaned back in his chair and looked at the old cavalry sabre leaning against a kitchen cupboard. "I will face my fate here..."

In the meantime, Hank Tornby had led his guests inside and secured the door with two locks and a heavy bolt.

The inside of the house was in dim semi-darkness as all the windows were taped with the same red and silver foil as on the door frame. Although it was broad daylight, Mr Tornby lit a paraffin lamp and placed it on a round wooden plate in the middle of the room.

Only now did Jupiter and Pete realize that all the walls were painted fire-red. The same applied to the few furnishings. But it was not only the colour that was strange. The house looked as if a tornado had recently swept through it. Papers, crumpled maps, open books and strange drawings were everywhere. Hundreds of small pieces of paper hung on the walls, scrawled with endless strings of numbers and enigmatic symbols. The ceiling was covered with both red foil and a strange net in which dozens of silver beads dangled. In the far right corner of the room, Jupiter spotted a ragged mattress under a red fabric tent. Two long spikes were attached to the upper edges of the tent, just as they protruded from the roof of the house.

"Why is almost everything red here?" asked Pete in amazement.

"Red insulates against manipulative rays," Mr Tornby replied with a meaningful expression and pulled a small tube of paint from his waistcoat. "I always carry a spare with me to smear on my forehead and temples in case of emergency. I never leave the house without red paint."

"Most interesting..." Jupiter murmured.

"Find somewhere to sit down," Tornby urged the boys. "I don't have any chairs because they would disturb the static balance in the room, so you'll have to make do on the floor."

After they had carefully settled down in the unmanageable chaos of things, Hank Tornby took off his fur hat for the first time and exposed a sparsely haired stubbly head.

Insistently, he looked at the boys. "So you want to know the truth, do you?"

"That's what we want, Mr Tornby," Jupiter replied seriously.

"All right, then, listen..." His voice was now just a whisper. "It's about... the great invasion!"

"Invasion?" asked Pete, confused.

Tornby nodded vigorously and pointed his scrawny index finger upwards. "From out there. They are already very close!"

Jupe raised his eyebrows in irritation. "Who are they?"
The old man moved even closer to the boys. His eyes flickered with excitement.
"The Topards!"

Brooding, Bob left the captain's house. The conversation with Mr Hold had been more confusing than enlightening. What had he meant by the 'demons of the past'?

Annoyed, Bob shielded his face from the scorching sun with his hand. He decided to take his cowboy hat with him from now on, even for short distances, and strolled back to Mr Brewster's house.

Once there, he was first surprised to find a strange man tampering with the broken window outside. But then Bob remembered that the professor wanted to ask for help from the skilled blacksmith. Jim Sesto was a tanned giant with short ice-grey hair and a three-day beard. He wore oil-stained work pants and a sleeveless blue shirt that had holes in several places. He was measuring the broken frame with a folding rule.

Mr Brewster's smiling face appeared in the open window. "Ah, Bob, back again? May I introduce Mr Sesto, who's kind enough to give me a hand."

"Very pleasant," Bob replied and took a step closer. "Since you are here anyway, perhaps I could ask you some questions about the fog incidents?"

"Already talked to the prof," grumbled the blacksmith.

"Unfortunately, the good Mr Sesto doesn't know any more than we do," Arnold Brewster explained sadly.

Bob thought for a moment, then turned to Mr Sesto again. "And do the 'demons of the past' mean anything to you?"

Sesto paused and glared angrily at the investigator. "You brats have no idea! This all happened over a hundred years ago—none of us bears any responsibility."

Bob raised his eyebrows in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything," the blacksmith rebuffed. "But I advise you to leave as soon as possible. This is no place for children!"

"It's all right, I understand," Bob placated and started to retreat into the house. Inside, the professor was waiting for him with a glass of water.

"Please don't take offence at Mr Sesto. Nerves are very tense with all of us." Worriedly, Mr Brewster looked out to the tall flag pole at the captain's house. "This must have been what it felt like when this fort was in a state of war."

"True," Bob agreed and took a big gulp. Thoughtfully, he took out his notebook and leafed through it. "What can possibly mean by these 'demons'?"

"I wonder about that too," the professor replied, frowning. "I remember one of the other residents also mentioning that word some time ago. It must be connected somehow with Fort Stockburn's past... and I have a certain idea about that as well..."

He went to the large bookshelf beside his desk. "This place is far too small to have its own newspaper, but I've collected a lot of background material for my new book on American primitive peoples. There should be one or two books about the Indians in South Dakota."

"And you think that will give more information about the 'demons'?" Bob asked.

"Possibly," Mr Brewster replied as he wandered down the shelf with his index finger. "But we won't know until I find the books."

"Then I wish you every success," Bob said. "When I have time later, I'll be glad to help you with your research."

After finishing his glass and picking up his hat, Bob decided to try Farmer Prescott now. He lived on the east side, just opposite Mr Brewster's house.

Bob walked thoughtfully down the dusty road, occasionally kicking aside small stones. As was often the case, there was not a soul in sight. A soft rustling behind him made Bob take notice. He stopped and turned around. Nothing. Only wooden façades against an unreal blue sky. Shrugging, Bob continued on his way, oblivious to a pair of suspicious eyes watching him from a dark recess.

No one responded to the knock on Mr Prescott's scratched front door and nothing was visible through the dirty windows. Then Bob heard the sound of hammering on metal. Curious, he walked around the house and peered around the corner. In an open shed, the farmer was busy repairing an ancient combine harvester that looked so rickety as if it was held together only by rust and dirt.

Mr Prescott was a slight man with thinning grey hair and hard, weather-beaten features. He wore a bushy old-fashioned whisker in which little beads of sweat glistened.

Bob sensed from the first second that his visit was unwelcome. When asked politely if Mr Prescott had any suspicions about the fog, the farmer just shook his head irritably.

"Don't care. Have to prepare for the harvest." The way the farmer said it made it unmistakably clear that there was no point in asking further.

As he walked on, Bob took one last casual look around the shed. Alongside every conceivable piece of farm equipment, he recognized a battered bucket to the right of the gate. The rust-proofing paint it contained was blazing red!

10. The Great Threat

In the meantime, Hank Tornby had finished his report and there was now a similar chaos in Jupiter's head as in the house.

"Um... so if I understand you correctly, the Topards are... a warlike race of aliens whose fleet is about to enter our solar system."

"Exactly," Mr Tornby confirmed, nodding vigorously.

"And the creatures from last night... belong to a landing party sent ahead to scout and secure the terrain under the cover of the fog," the First Investigator continued haltingly.

"Right. This remote area offers perfect conditions for the planned big landing operation of the aliens. Only we here are still in their way."

"And... the government is privy to all this?" asked Pete, trying hard to be matter-of-fact.

"Of course!" replied Tornby excitedly. "NASA made contact with the Topards a long time ago and found out that they are vastly superior to us in technology and military. That's why they've decided in the White House to cooperate with the aliens to stay involved in power after the invasion."

"And all of this will take place in four phases," Jupiter echoed.

"That's it. Phase One—the Topards explore the arrival area. Phase Two—the human population in the landing zone is forcibly expelled or eliminated. Phase Three—government agents occupy the most important positions in the country and pave the way for the Topards to conquer the United States. Phase Four—the aliens take over world domination together with the US president!"

Jupiter cleared his throat softly. For the umpteenth time, he had the feeling that in the next second, a TV presenter would storm into the house and announce with a grin that they had fallen for a hidden camera prank.

But no presenter came. After giving Pete a furtive glance, Jupiter turned back to their peculiar host.

"Mr Tornby, if you will allow me, I would like to ask you a somewhat delicate question, and I would ask you to be quite frank."

"Out with it, boy."

"Did you call us in Rocky Beach two days ago and sent a message to the airline for us yesterday?"

Eyes wide, Tornby stared at the First Investigator in disbelief. "Me, no way! I don't touch a phone—they could trace me then!"

"Right, we hadn't thought of that, sorry," Pete replied soothingly.

"And what is your opinion of Professor Brewster?" asked Jupiter as he stroked his fingers thoughtfully over the red wooden planks. "Do you think he should get out of Fort Stockburn?"

"Everyone should be gone before Phase Three begins," Tornby replied seriously. "No one is safe here anymore."

Pete scratched the back of his head. "If these Topards are so technically superior to us, why do they attack us with claws and teeth?"

Mr Tornby gestured impatiently in the air. “I told you—these creatures are just the scouts—the Topards’ hunting dogs, so to speak, which are set on the game before the hunters shoot it. The real armament of the Topards will be unlike anything we know here on Earth.”

Now Jupiter felt it was time to ask the all-important question. “And... how do you know all this?”

With a broad smile, the old man tapped his forehead. “I have a telepathic connection to the flagship of the Topardian fleet. They don’t know that, of course—otherwise they would have made me disappear long ago.”

“But if you know exactly what’s coming—why are you staying here?” asked Pete, irritated.

“Because I will never give up this ground,” Tornby announced with fierce determination. “I have made arrangements and I will not back down, even if everyone else takes flight. The evidence must be protected!”

“Evidence?” Jupiter listened up. Now it could get interesting after all.

“Of course! For years, I’ve been collecting evidence I find on my forays across the prairies.” With nimble fingers, the bearded man reached under a loose wooden plank and lifted a cardboard box from the cavity beneath. The contents were a motley assortment of junk devices that Tornby had undoubtedly found along the country road. There was even a dismantled car radio.

“I see,” Jupe replied with laboriously suppressed disappointment.

Mr Tornby lowered his voice imploringly. “So now you know what’s going on here... and I advise you—stay out of this. It’s not for kids like you! You’d better get out of here—the sooner the better!”

Grimly, Tornby looked over at the film-covered window. “Only I will stay to proclaim the truth to posterity later. I, Hank Tornby—last defender of Fort Stockburn and prophet of a new age!”

From his next stop, Bob hoped for a little more luck. Miss Daggett greeted him with an exhausted smile and invited him to have a glass of milk on her verandah. With deep lines of worry on her face, she sat slumped in her rocking chair and gently cuddled the head of Rusty lying next to her.

“I just can’t take it anymore,” she said softly. “I thought I was strong enough, but last night was just too much.”

“That was really bad,” Bob replied sympathetically, pushing aside a green lantern to place his glass of milk on a small table.

Miss Daggett’s gaze was lost in the vastness of the prairie. “And then this terrible helplessness...”

“What was it actually like when the police came then?” Bob wanted to know.

“Don’t remind me.” Miss Daggett made a throwing away hand gesture. “After the third incident, I called the sheriff in Sturgis and asked for help. It took almost three hours after that before a Jeep showed up here with two annoyed deputies. We told them everything and showed them the scratch marks on the doors, but you could tell from the start that they didn’t believe a word we said. They must have thought we were retarded hillbillies who made it all up...”

Bob leaned back in his chair, frowning. “May I ask you if you know anything about the ‘demons of the past’?”

For a split-second, Miss Daggett's features tightened. "That... is a bad story." With erratic movements she looked around in all directions. "I don't want to talk about it. It might just make things worse."

"Why?" asked Bob tensely. "A problem has to be investigated so that it can be solved, isn't it?"

"It's long too late for that. After all, I wanted to try and get through it all." She shook her head bitterly. "But nothing in the world is worth all that."

With the last words, her left hand clenched around a small leather-bound book, which Bob only now noticed. He thought he could make out the letters 'FM' at the bottom, but was not quite sure. Before he could enquire further, Rusty suddenly raised his head and straightened his ears.

"What's the matter, Rusty?" asked Miss Daggett anxiously. As if in answer, the sheepdog now began to bark in panic, jumped up and ran into the house.

11. The Trapper

In the meantime, Jupiter and Pete had said goodbye to Hank Tornby. Outside in the bright sunlight, they felt as if they had just left a dark room crammed full of crazy ideas.

"That was scary," Pete muttered. "I wonder if there's... really anything to it? This Tornby seems to be absolutely convinced of the invasion."

"That's what he is," Jupiter replied. "Still, it's all that exists in Tornby's head. There are more of such conspiracy theorists than you'd think."

Pete stretched and exhaled deeply. "What do you think of the red paint? Do you think Tornby is behind the agitation against the professor?"

"His reaction to my question was too general for that," Jupiter pointed out. "After all, he is convinced that everyone must leave here before Phase Three begins. Mr Brewster doesn't seem to play any particular role for him."

"So you think someone is deliberately using red paint to lay a trail to Mr Tornby?"

"If so, it was very likely the same person who sent us the message," Jupiter replied. "A plan as simple as it is devious. The misdeeds are carried out in such a way that they make Tornby appear to be the perpetrator, with whom reasonable conversation is almost impossible."

"So what do we do now?" the Second Investigator asked as he looked around to the other side of the street.

"I suggest we drop in on Mr Cobble. If I remember the professor's description correctly, he lives only three houses away."

Jupiter was not mistaken. Samuel Cobble was visibly surprised by the unexpected visit, but he readily agreed to talk to the investigators about recent events.

Mr Cobble was of sturdy build, though only just as tall as Jupiter. A powerful but carefully trimmed full beard filled about three quarters of his wrinkled face. He wore trousers of light tanned leather and a coarsely woven shirt, the sleeves of which he had rolled up. The claw chain around his neck and the raccoon cap on the wall completed the picture of a trapper.

In the sparsely furnished living room, Cobble invited his guests to take a seat at a soot-blackened table. As they sat down, the First Investigator noticed that the trapper, with a casual gesture of his hand, pushed aside a horse blanket that lay beside him on a rustic dresser. After the boys had briefly explained the reason for their stay at Fort Stockburn, Jupiter got straight to the point and handed over his find from the morning.

"I found this after last night's attack," Jupe said. "Can you tell me if these hairs are from an animal?"

Mr Cobble put on thick-rimmed glasses and looked at the tuft of hair from all sides. He twirled it between his thumb and forefinger, finally held it to his nose and smelled it. Meanwhile, Jupiter's gaze wandered again to the chest of drawers. It seemed that the trapper had not adjusted the horse blanket, but had slipped it over a narrow book, the edge of which still peeked out from under it. The First Investigator noticed a partially covered word 'Greenbri'.

“I’m sorry,” Mr Cobble finally said. “I can’t place these hairs. In any case, they don’t come from a badger or coyote.”

“They’d be far too small too,” Pete muttered and looked over at Jupiter. “Have you ever thought that we might be dealing with... Bigfoots?”

The First Investigator rubbed his forehead thoughtfully. “I know what you’re alluding to. But despite all the openness towards zoological diversity, I think it’s out of the question. After all, all alleged sightings of these large-footed creatures are confined to forested mountain regions. It would therefore be most peculiar if a whole herd of Bigfoots suddenly appeared in the middle of the unprotected prairie.”

“True again,” Pete admitted and turned to the trapper. “What other animals live around here besides coyotes and badgers?”

“Quite a lot. Apart from our horses and cattle, there are, for example, deer, bighorn sheep and pronghorns... also raccoons, foxes, porcupines, rabbits, prairie dogs and of course snakes. There are even cougars, bobcats and bison in our national parks. But this tuft of fur does not match any of those animals. The closest resemblance is the top coat of a cougar, but it’s too long and dark for that.”

“A mixture of human and cougar, then,” whispered the Second Investigator with a sombre expression.

Mr Cobble pointed out of the window. “I have always been closer to nature than to people, apart from my late wife and son. I’ve been roaming this country for nearly seventy years now and I know every plant and animal in this region. But I have never seen creatures like those in this fog before.”

He ran his hand through his frizzy white hair. “In my life, I’ve had many dangerous animal encounters where it was literally touch-and-go whether I’d get out of it in one piece. The most important thing is not to lose your nerve, and I never have. Never. But those demon creatures out there... scare me.”

“Demons?” asked Jupiter, irritated.

At that moment, a loud shout rang out from the distance: “The fog! It’s coming back!”

12. The Last Stand

Pete shrank up in horror. "That was Bob!"

Immediately, Mr Cobble grabbed a long hunting rifle and rushed outside, followed by Pete. Jupiter paused for a moment and quickly pushed aside the blanket on the dresser to take a look at the small notebook. Then he, too, rushed to the door.

Outside the door, everyone looked around feverishly. Distant screams announced the approaching danger.

"The fog is coming from the north!" shouted Pete. "It's already close to the entrance to the village! What are we going to do now?"

"Over there!" Jupiter shouted, pointing to the fountain. "There's Mr Brewster with another man. Let's go over there!"

Together they hurried to the centre of the village where the worried professor introduced the two investigators to Mr Sesto, who was holding a heavy sledgehammer and looking nervously at the fog. Mr Brewster had armed himself with a hatchet. Bob came running from Grace Daggett's house.

"The fog seems to have come to a halt," Bob gasped breathlessly.

"What about Grace?" asked Mr Sesto anxiously.

"She's barricaded herself in the house with Rusty," Bob explained. In the shadows of the distant barn, he thought he recognized Hank Tornby, who was hiding behind several large crates with his shotgun. There was no sign of William Prescott... and someone else was missing.

"There!" Excitedly, Jupiter pointed towards Mr Hold's house.

Just then, the captain had stepped outside in full cavalry uniform and with his feathered hat on. Next to his revolver holster, the shiny bugle hung from his belt on a red cord. In front of the flag pole he paused briefly and saluted. Then he drew his heavy cavalry sabre and marched resolutely towards the white wall.

"Don't do it!" roared Mr Sesto at the top of his voice.

Jupe was about to run after the captain, but Mr Cobble held him back. He had his hunting rifle on. "Stay here! If you run into my line of fire, I can't give Hold any cover in case the creatures show up."

Everyone held their breath as the captain strode into the screaming fog with his sabre raised. At the same moment as he disappeared, absolute silence fell. The small group stared in horror at the threatening white fog. Then, as if from another world, the bright sound of a bugle rang out from far away. The trapper flinched in dismay.

"*Taps*," he whispered, stunned. "The bugle call at military funerals..."

Before anyone could react, the fog began to dissipate. Jupiter was the first to overcome his rigidity and run towards the blowing plumes.

"Come on! We have to go and see what happened!"

The others hurriedly followed him. This time, however, Pete held back his pace so that they arrived almost simultaneously at the spot where the fog had just been thickest. Mr Hold's footprints ended in a mess of churned sand and several of the bizarre traces that had

remained even after the night's attack. They seemed to have come out of nowhere and were arranged in a star shape around the captain's tracks.

"These creatures have surrounded him," the trapper noted anxiously.

"And then?" asked Mr Brewster, aghast. "The tracks don't lead anywhere. Where did they go? Where is the captain?"

"Gone," Mr Sesto murmured agitatedly. "They took him away..."

"They can't have just gone like that!" cried Jupiter. "They didn't disappear into the air, so the solution can only be found underground!" Defiantly, the First Investigator settled down on the ground and began digging around in the heated earth with his hands. "Come on—help me, fellas! There must be a hatch or something similar here somewhere!" But just as Bob, Pete and also the professor had knelt down, a panicked call rang out to them.

"Come quickly! One of the monsters is here!"

Farmer Prescott was standing on Miss Daggett's verandah, waving wildly. Quickly they all grabbed their weapons and ran back into the village.

"Over there!" Mr Prescott pointed frantically to an alcove between Miss Daggett's house and a large shed. "I was in the field when the fog appeared, and on my way here, I suddenly saw this huge creature. He was skulking around Grace's house. Just when he saw me, he ran in there!"

With his rifle cocked, the trapper peered into the alcove and went through. The others walked around the house and looked around in all directions.

"Nothing here," Mr Cobble observed. "Whatever was here has disappeared."

In the meantime, the blacksmith had gone into the house to check on Miss Daggett, who had not shown her face until now. A few seconds later, his call for help reached the outside.

"Come quickly! I think Grace is having a heart attack!"

Immediately everyone rushed into the house. Grace Daggett was lying on a couch in the living room, panting and drenched in sweat. Rusty was pacing nervously around the room, yelping like mad.

"Get the dog out of here first," the professor ordered, bending over Miss Daggett with concern.

From his previous expeditions, the professor had extensive knowledge of first aid. Within a short time, he was able to give the all-clear with relief. Grace Daggett had suffered a circulatory collapse and was gradually recovering. After Mr Cobble had made a fortifying tea and the professor had checked Miss Daggett's pulse again, the group gradually dispersed.

"I'll stay with Grace until she recovers," Mr Sesto explained, gently stroking her cheek with his powerful hand. "As soon as she regains her strength, I'll pack up and leave with her. It's the last straw." As the blacksmith said this, an expression of surprise flitted across the faces of the other residents.

Wordlessly, they parted. Mr Brewster and The Three Investigators also stepped outside.

"Maybe Mr Tornby is right about his aliens after all," Pete muttered. "It looks like the captain has been beamed away!"

"What kind of aliens?" asked Bob, irritated.

"We'll tell you in a minute," Jupiter replied. "The fact is that Mr Hold was abducted in a most mysterious way. That makes it all the more important that we take another close look at the crime scene. Besides, I can't shake the feeling that Mr Prescott's monster sighting was only meant to lure us away from there."

"Really?" asked Pete in amazement.

"That's a pretty serious accusation," the professor noted.

“Not an accusation, but only an assumption for the time being,” Jupiter corrected. “In any case, there was not the slightest trace of the creature that supposedly appeared.”

“Speaking of traces,” Bob turned to Mr Brewster. “Have you found the books you were looking for in the meantime?”

“What kind of books?” asked Pete.

“A two-part reference book that I hope will give me some clues,” the professor explained. “Yes, I found both books, but I haven’t had a chance to read them yet.”

“I’ll help you with that as soon as we get back,” Bob replied.

Back at the site of Mr Hold’s disappearance, The Three Investigators and Mr Brewster examined the ground thoroughly but found no evidence of an underground entrance.

“Unbelievable,” Jupiter muttered. “I was one hundred percent sure that we would discover something...”

“Shouldn’t we inform the police?” asked Pete with a worried expression. “After all, someone has been abducted!”

“So it would seem,” the First Investigator remarked. “As things stand, we cannot and must not exclude the captain as a possible suspect. The whole thing could have been a mere staging.”

“That’s right,” Bob replied. “Besides, I know from Miss Daggett that the local police are not very cooperative.”

Pete sighed. “So once again we are on our own...”

13. Shadows of the Past

After returning to the professor's house, the boys reported on their respective interviews. Meanwhile, Bob leafed through the first of the two reference books the professor had picked out.

Pondering, the First Investigator pinched his lower lip. "Let's neglect the question of the creatures for a moment and concentrate on the crime itself. I'm sure we can all agree that no one can just disappear just like that. So the captain and his captors must have moved away from the scene."

Bob nodded. "You said it yourself earlier—they didn't disappear into the air. There was nothing to be seen or heard of any aircraft—a helicopter, a hot-air balloon or anything similar. If so, we should have noticed that after the fog cleared. So the captain could not have been taken upwards."

"But we haven't found a way down either," Mr Brewster interjected. "If there was a hatch that could be opened and closed within seconds, we would have found it."

"Nothing was there," Pete muttered. "Absolutely nothing."

"The fact that we haven't found anything doesn't automatically mean there's nothing there," Jupe explained, looking out the window. "As crazy as Mr Tornby's ideas are, he's right about one thing—the incidents keep getting worse. It started with the screaming fog, then the monsters followed and the climax for now is the abduction of Captain Hold."

"You can be really encouraging..." Pete looked around agitatedly. "What kind of beings are they? At the moment, we have the choice between warlike aliens and monstrous cougar-people. Both very bad..."

"To top it all off, I could offer a third variation," Bob now spoke up.

"You've found something?" asked Mr Brewster, who was meanwhile leafing through the second book.

"I did," Bob confirmed. "I came across a nineteenth-century chronicler's account here of the Indian tribes of that time. After all, the state names South and North Dakota derive from the Dakota Indian people who settled here along with other tribes until they were subjugated."

"That's right," the professor confirmed.

"As it stands, the then cavalry base of Fort Stockburn played a very inglorious role during the last fighting between the cavalry and the natives in this region."

"That sounds interesting!" Jupiter remarked.

"So... among the rebellious tribes were a subgroup of the Dakota. During the decisive battle in July 1889, the heavily outnumbered tribe members entrenched themselves in a surprisingly looming fog bank. The commanding general of Fort Stockburn issued orders to fire from all guns into the fog, even though there were women and children among the Indians."

"Terrible," the professor murmured in dismay.

"After the unconditional surrender of the survivors, the last tribe members were transported to one of the large reserves. Before that, however, one of their shamans invoked a

curse on the fort: 'May the demons of vengeance return one day in the garb of fog and devour your skin and hair!'"

"Oh man..." breathed the Second Investigator.

"That's not all," Bob continued. "According to the chronicler, the shaman's last word was '*kaonspe*'!, which means 'They will teach you by force'."

"*Kaonspe*," Jupiter repeated with narrowed eyes. "So that's what we heard on the phone back in Rocky Beach."

Stunned, Pete wiped his face. "So these creatures in the fog are... Indian vengeance demons."

Bob looked out through the window with a frown. "That's what everyone here believes, anyway. Now I also realize why people react so strangely. Everyone knows the story of the Indian curse."

Mr Brewster nodded in dismay. "And the captain wanted to sacrifice himself because he felt responsible for the fog attacks because of what his great-grandfather had done."

The First Investigator cleared his throat and clasped his hands on the table. "This is indeed dramatic news. Nevertheless, I do not believe in ghost stories, but assume that earthly machinations are behind all these actions... until proven otherwise."

"Well, I hope so," Pete grumbled. "Indian curses are not to be trifled with."

"You watch too many horror movies," Bob observed as he put the two books back on the shelf. "Besides, it might be possible—" At that moment, Bob's gaze fell on the framed photo on the wall showing the professor's old friend, Frank Malvey next to his mother. Until now, no one had paid any particular attention to the photo, but now a small detail had suddenly caught Bob's eye—Malvey's mother was wearing a beautiful necklace with a teardrop-shaped dark gemstone.

"Have you found something?" asked Jupiter in surprise.

"Maybe," Bob replied as he looked at the photo more closely. "Mr Brewster... what was that strange line your friend said? That line about a 'drop'."

The professor frowned. "Wait... uh, oh yes: 'Soon, the hour strikes for me to leave. I bid you farewell, my friend... The steady drop of time will always connect us together.' Why do you ask?"

A smile spread across Bob's face. "Because I think I just found that 'drop'."

"What?" gasped Pete. Curious, they all gathered in front of the photo on the wall.

"You could be right, Bob," the First Investigator remarked and turned to the professor. "There is a drop-shaped stone in the necklace worn by Frank's mother. Do you know this striking piece of jewellery?"

Mr Brewster rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I only met Frank's mother a few times back then. She died in the early eighties. If I remember correctly, she always wore that necklace."

"Then it can be assumed that she left the jewellery to her son," Jupiter concluded.

"I suppose so," replied Mr Brewster. "Oh, and you think Frank was going to leave me this gem?"

"In view of the strange will, I think that is very likely," confirmed the First Investigator. "He probably distrusted the notary and, as a precaution, only sent you a coded message."

"All well and good," Pete replied. "So now we know what was meant by the 'drop'... but where is it?"

Bob frowned. "Maybe there's a second clue in that sentence."

"That really only leaves 'the hour strikes for me to leave'," the professor noted. "That does indeed sound a bit too turgid for Frank, but I don't see how we can—"

"The hour strikes!" cried Pete abruptly. "Of course!"

Without another word, he jumped up. Surprised, his colleagues and the professor watched him tamper with the large grandfather clock.

“Will you tell us what you are doing?” asked Bob irritably.

“I just remembered how much the striking of the clock startled me last night!” replied Pete excitedly. “Maybe the phrase with ‘the hour strikes’ is meant to refer to the grandfather clock.”

Jupiter smiled appreciatively. “Well deduced, Pete. The clock could well serve as a hiding place for the jewellery. So let’s get to work!”

Together they examined the grandfather clock centimetre by centimetre and finally Bob actually found what they were looking for.

“Fellas! The pendulum weight can be unscrewed!” Gingerly, he opened the metal weight and pulled out a small leather pouch, which he handed to Mr Brewster. “Here, the honour is yours, sir.”

Carefully, the professor unknotted the bag. What emerged was an elegant necklace with a magnificent pendant. The drop-shaped deep blue sapphire was set in silver and glittered like a small star in the incident sunlight.

“Beautiful,” Jupiter murmured.

“There is a note enclosed,” Mr Brewster noted, unfolding the paper.

Dear Arnold,

I am very glad you understood my hint. I have always cherished the ‘Drop of Time’. Now it shall accompany you and always remind you of our shared past. Farewell, my friend.

Yours, Frank.

“This stone looks really precious,” Bob observed in amazement.

“Indeed,” Jupiter agreed thoughtfully. “And precisely therein could lie a motive for the unknown intimidator.”

“What do you mean?” asked Pete in surprise.

“I have been bothered all along by the illogic that anyone could seriously believe Mr Brewster to be the cause of the fog. This is all the more true now that we know the story of the Indian curse. On the other hand, simple greed would be a much more plausible motivation for the actions against the professor.”

“The greed for the ‘drop of time’,” concluded Mr Brewster.

“Right. Mr Malvey’s mother lived in Fort Stockburn and always wore this striking necklace until she died,” Jupiter continued. “So everyone in the village knew this piece of jewellery and could guess that it was still in this house somewhere.”

“And you think that one of them wanted to take the necklace after Frank’s death?” the professor asked sceptically.

“That seems quite conclusive to me,” replied the First Investigator. “This person must have known or at least suspected that Mr Malvey had hidden the necklace here in the house. And of course it didn’t suit the person in question that you suddenly appeared here.”

“So the threats weren’t about someone blaming me for the fog,” Mr Brewster concluded. “They just want me out of the house so they can look for the necklace undisturbed.”

“Given the unquestionably great value of this gemstone, I think that is a viable reason,” Jupe confirmed.

“Sure,” Pete agreed. “With this bling, you could afford some luxuries. It would definitely be worth the effort.”

“Worth...” Bob thoughtfully and folded his arms. “I just remembered what Miss Daggett said earlier about the fog terror: ‘nothing in the world is worth all that’. She got really tense about it and—” His eyes widened. “Hey, and now I remember something else! In her hands, she held a strange little book. That must have been tremendously important to her.”

“Were you able to see the book title?” asked Pete.

“No, I didn’t see a title,” Bob replied musingly. “There were just two curved letters. ‘F’ and ‘M’, I think.”

“‘F’ and ‘M’... those are Frank Malvey’s initials!” Jupiter concluded excitedly and turned to Mr Brewster. “Do you know if your friend kept a diary?”

“Yes... he did,” the professor confirmed hesitantly. “I hadn’t noticed until now, but it’s true—the diary was missing from his things.”

“It follows that Miss Daggett was here in the house after your friend’s death and took the diary,” the First Investigator concluded. “Perhaps she hoped to find in the book a clue as to where Mr Malvey kept the ‘drop of time’.”

“Then you seriously believe that the lovely Miss Daggett is responsible for the threats against me?” asked Mr Brewster. “I don’t think so.”

“Maybe she’s tired of living here and finally wants a change of scenery,” Pete mused.

“Change of scenery...” Frowning, Jupiter ran a hand through his hair.

“Did I say something wrong?” the Second Investigator asked irritably.

“On the contrary. It made me think of something I’d almost forgotten. Earlier, in Mr Cobble’s house, I noticed a little brochure that the trapper seemed to want to hide from us.”

“A brochure?” asked Pete in amazement.

Jupiter nodded. “Cobble had tried to cover it with a horse blanket. On leaving the house, I took a look and saw that it was a brochure of a luxury resort in West Virginia! The name was Greenbrier Resort. Looks like Mr Cobble fancies a change of scenery too.”

“Don’t you think you’re assuming too much about this?” asked Bob doubtfully.

“My intuition has rarely deceived me,” replied the First Investigator. “Besides, the name ‘Greenbrier Resort’ somehow sounds familiar to me. I just don’t know where I’ve come across it before.”

“Well, I can’t for the life of me imagine Mr Cobble planning a holiday in West Virginia,” the professor replied. “He’s never left this region and he doesn’t care about material values.”

“Maybe he wants to give the wealth to his son, whom he mentioned,” Jupiter speculated. “Do you know more about him?”

Mr Brewster shook his head. “Just that his name is Mike and he lives in Rapid City. As far as I know, he and his father have little contact.”

Jupiter sighed. “Then the mystery of the resort must remain unsolved for the time being—at least until I can recall how I came across that name. In the meantime, however, we should definitely put a question mark over Mr Cobble and Miss Daggett.”

“Speaking of which...” Bob added. “We should also give Mr Prescott a question mark as well.”

“And why?” asked the First Investigator in surprise.

“Of course, that’s not proof yet, but I discovered a bucket of red rust-proofing paint in his shed that looked exactly like the one used for the graffiti on the wall and the side mirror.”

“So more suspects...” Pete muttered, blowing a strand of hair out of his face. “So what do we do now?”

“Since we could not find any useful traces at the entrance to the village, I suggest that we next undertake a reconnaissance of the surrounding area.” Jupiter turned to Mr Brewster.

“May we borrow your car for this purpose?”

“Of course,” the professor replied. “In the meantime, I’ll check on Miss Daggett again and ask Mr Sesto if I can help him pack for departure.”

In the following minutes, The Three Investigators prepared for their excursion. Pete, who was in charge of security, repeatedly checked the contents of his backpack, which contained three compasses, maps, a folding spade, walkie-talkies, water bottles, Bob’s video camera and twenty metres of nylon rope.

In Mr Brewster’s off-road vehicle, the boys first drove a short distance north. After barely five minutes, they had reached the spot where Captain Hold had supposedly first saw the fog. The heat was breathtaking in the truest sense of the word and was hardly alleviated even by the light southeast breeze.

“Now we could really need Martin Ishniak’s help,” Pete noted. “After all, the professor’s nephew knows something about tracking.”

“He’s not his nephew,” Bob corrected. “He’s Mr Brewster’s niece’s husband.”

The Second Investigator twisted the corners of his mouth. “Well, his nephew-in-law then, Mr Nit-Picker.”

“Whatever his exact relationship, we’ll have to make it without Martin Ishniak,” Jupiter replied, crouching down.

Panting, the investigators examined every square metre of the ground, but at first nothing conspicuous was found. Then, however, Bob became aware of a strange dark object in a depression in the ground some distance away.

“Look, fellas. We should take a closer look at that thing there.”

When they reached the hollow, Pete was the first to realize what it was. “A wrench! Still pretty new, by the looks of it. How did it get here?”

“In any case, it couldn’t have been thrown out of a car that far off the highway,” Bob noted.

“Certainly not.” The Second Investigator turned his gaze south. “After all, that’s at least —”

He faltered and gasped in horror. Bob and Jupe also whirled around and winced.

About a hundred metres away, the jet-black silhouette of a creature stood out against the heat-flickering sky. The huge figure of terror stood motionless on a hill and stared over at the boys.

And it was not alone...

14. Hunted

“Oh no,” Bob breathed as he let his gaze wander over the horizon. “They’ve got us surrounded!”

From one moment to the next, six of the eerie creatures had appeared on the surrounding hills. Like monstrous scarecrows, they remained completely motionless, as if waiting for a sign to attack.

“Quick—back to the car!” shouted Jupiter.

Hastily, the boys rushed up a small slope, but then stopped as if struck by lightning. Where the professor’s all-terrain vehicle had been standing just a moment ago, a dense wall of fog was billowing out of which shrieking screams were now coming from.

This time it was Bob who caught on the quickest. “On foot then! Go!”

They charged past the fog in a great arc towards Fort Stockburn. At first, it looked as if they could make it, but when Pete looked around a few seconds later, he made a terrible discovery. “The fog is following us! Against the wind!”

“It’s catching up!” shouted Bob.

Suddenly Jupiter slowed down.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Pete, horrified.

The First Investigator had now almost come to a standstill. “Fellas! We have come to South Dakota to solve the mystery of this fog! When, if not now, would be the best opportunity to do so!”

Dismayed, Pete waved his arms. “You’re going to let the fog catch up with you voluntarily? Are you crazy?”

“We won’t make it to Fort Stockburn anyway!” replied Jupiter. “So instead of running away, we’d better get ready!”

The Second Investigator couldn’t believe it. “You can’t be serious!”

Bob cast a hasty glance backwards. “I’m not comfortable with it either, but I think Jupe is right!”

Cursing, Pete took off his backpack and hastily opened it. Then he grabbed the end of the nylon rope and gave it to Jupiter.

“Here! Pull the rope through your belt! And you, Bob, tie the end to your belt! I’ll do the same!”

Hastily they carried out Pete’s instruction. Now about three metres of rope swung between them. Pete had tied the remaining rope around his waist so that he could release additional metres in an emergency. Just before the first plumes reached them, the Second Investigator quickly gave Bob and Jupiter their compasses. Then the fog broke over them like a white wave and the screaming stopped.

“Whatever happens—make sure the rope doesn’t come loose!” shouted Pete.

The fog was so thick that The Three Investigators could barely see two metres away. For a few seconds, they remained completely motionless.

“So what now?” asked Bob. “Do we just stand still and wait?”

The First Investigator glanced at his compass. “Fort Stockburn is due south from us. I suggest we move slowly in that direction and see what happens.” The boys continued on their

way, each about an arm's length away. They kept their eyes on the ground in front of them so as not to trip over stones or bushes. The fog seemed to get thicker by the minute.

Suddenly Pete cried out. "No! Help!" He stumbled and waved his hands wildly back and forth.

Startled, Jupiter turned to him. "What happened?"

"There was something on my back! Something touched me!"

Hectically, the boys looked in all directions... but there was only boundless white.

"Help! Something's reaching for me!" Panicking, the Second Investigator lashed out and ran. As he did so, his rope reserve came loose from his waist. From one second to the next, the unreal thick fog had swallowed him.

Shortly afterwards, the rope on Juve's belt tightened and he was tugged. "Pete! You're running in the wrong direction!" He tried to hold his friend back, but to no avail.

Now Bob was at his side, panting and grabbing the rope that led into the white nothingness ahead of them. Gradually, he sensed that Pete slowed down but still could neither be seen nor heard. The fog seemed to surround all sounds with cotton wool.

"Stop, Pete!" shouted Bob.

Suddenly, the tension on the rope slackened. Staggering, the two boys came to a halt and struggled for breath.

"Pete! Say something!" cried Jupiter anxiously.

Bob's lips trembled. "Why isn't he answering?"

"I don't know!" hissed Jupiter, pressed. "But he must still be at the other end, otherwise the rope would be on the ground. Come on, let's go and see!"

Bit by bit, he groped his way forward following the rope while Bob followed him at a distance. By now the fog had become so thick that the First Investigator could barely make out his outstretched hands. Suddenly his fingertips encountered something rough. At first Jupiter thought it was Pete's shirt, but it was not. It was fur. Shocked, he craned his neck and saw the enormous outline of a shaggy creature looming before him. Yellow animal eyes stared down at him and a deep growl sounded. Jupiter saw the loose end of the rope dangling from the creature's left clawed hand. He whirled around in panic.

"Run!" Juve yelled.

Immediately, the boys rushed away. Jupiter suddenly realized with horror that they were still connected to the monster by the rope.

"Undo the rope! Quick!" Juve shouted to his friend.

In fact, Bob somehow managed to loosen the end of the rope. Shortly afterwards, Jupiter had also freed himself and hastily dropped the rope. Although Bob was walking only a metre next to Juve, he could hardly make him out in the white plumes.

"We must not lose each other!" Juve yelled. "Try to grab my hand!"

"Where are you?" shouted Bob back fearfully.

"Well, here—right next to you!" With erratic movements Jupiter groped to the side, but he reached into the void. He tried again and again to find Bob's hand, but he couldn't. "It's no use—we have to stop!"

Bob did not answer. Dismayed, Jupiter stopped and listened. No footsteps, only silence and his own panting breath. The First Investigator's thoughts were racing. How much time had passed while he had been trying to grab Bob's hand? Ten seconds? Half a minute? How far could they have moved away from each other in the meantime?

"Bob! Where are you?"

There! Hadn't there been a noise? A distant call? The First Investigator held his breath and listened intently. Indeed—there was something! Far away, someone was yelling: "Juve!"

Pete! Where are you?”

It was Bob. The distance to him had to be far greater than Jupiter would have thought possible. He tried to determine the direction from which the calls were coming and then slowly walked towards them.

“Bob! It’s me—Jupe! Stay where you are! I’m trying to get to you!”

But Bob did not seem to hear him. Again and again, he called out desperately the same thing: “Jupe! Pete! I’m here!”

Jupiter quickened his steps and stumbled over hollows and bushes towards the voice. “Bob! I’ll be right with you! Don’t go any further!”

Still no answer. Instead, the calls now sounded from a completely different direction and much quieter than before.

Stunned, the First Investigator stopped and turned his head to the side. No doubt about it—the calls were now coming from the west instead of the north. Bob seemed to be running out of his mind, changing direction again and again. It was hopeless. Jupiter would never catch up with him, and what had happened to Pete he dared not even imagine. This horrible fog seemed to play its evil game with the boys and push them away from each other. Jupiter couldn’t even try to radio his friends because the walkie-talkies were still in Pete’s backpack.

Completely exhausted, the First Investigator fell to his knees and, breathing heavily, put his head back. The sun, which could only be guessed at, seemed to stare down at him from the milky sky like a pale Cyclops eye.

And then suddenly he heard footsteps.

Pete had no idea where he was and what had happened to his friends. He only knew that he had run away and suddenly felt a huge clawed hand on his shoulder. He had managed to break free, but the monster had anticipated the movement and grabbed the rope in a flash.

When the snarling creature had already come within a few centimetres, Pete had finally been able to undo the knot on his belt. He had ducked under the creature’s shaggy arms and rushed away. In the process, however, he had lost his backpack. And then he had just run until he suddenly stumbled and fell to the ground.

Dazed, Pete looked around. Had he hit a stone with his foot? Then he could use it as a weapon against his pursuer. There was no more sound of the creature, but it had certainly not disappeared.

Quickly, the Second Investigator crouched down and scanned the ground. Suddenly his hands grasped something hard. But it was not a stone, but something metallic. It was circular in shape and had a kind of latch. He must have tripped over it. No doubt about it—it was a hatch on the ground! Perhaps one of the secret passages he was looking for? Or the entrance to an old working shaft from the sixties, when the water and gas pipes were laid to Fort Stockburn?

Hastily Pete jiggled the handle until he heard a click. Hidden hinges squeaked as he prised open the hatch and looked down into a dark shaft with a narrow ladder leading down the inside wall. He had no time to think long. The creature could burst out of the fog at any moment.

Whatever this opening had served for, it definitely offered a good hiding place. Pete would descend into the shaft and then wait for the fog to clear. As quietly as possible, he let himself slide into the shaft until his feet found a foothold on the rungs. To make sure he had enough air to breathe, he used a small stone to create a gap at the hatch when he closed it. Then he started to descend.

After a few metres, Pete had reached the bottom. From the weak light coming in from the narrow hatch opening, he saw that he was in a tunnel. Exhausted, he settled down on the ground. What might have happened to Jupiter and Bob in the meantime? Had they managed to get back to Fort Stockburn?

The Second Investigator looked around strained. He hurriedly reached into his right trouser pocket, where he was relieved to find the small compass. His hunch had not been wrong—from this position, the tunnel led directly south, towards Fort Stockburn.

Pete felt a tingling in the stomach area. Fear and exhaustion briefly faded into the background and gave way to tentative hope. If this tunnel really did lead all the way under the place, then there should be another access to go back up! Such an escape route would be a hundred times safer than running through the fog outside.

At Fort Stockburn he could then get help to look for Jupe and Bob if they were not back yet. To his delight, Pete found a small flashlight in his left trouser pocket, which he had pocketed just in case. He switched it on and took another deep breath, then lowered his head and walked slightly bent over into the narrow tunnel.

15. Fear and Hope

“Bob!” Jupiter couldn’t believe it. Just when he thought he would have to run away from one of the creatures again, he dimly recognized Bob coming towards him in the fog.

“Jupe! At last!” Bob exclaimed. Overjoyed, the boys hugged each other.

“Are you following the poles too?” asked Bob excitedly.

“Poles? I don’t understand...”

“I just spotted one of the power poles,” Bob explained. “We must have walked past Fort Stockburn in the fog without realizing it. After all, it was less than two hundred metres to it.”

“I see!” replied Jupiter joyfully. “The poles are right on the country road that leads to the village from the south. So we have to keep north with the compass and then we can be guided from pole to pole to Fort Stockburn. And then we’ll get help for Pete!”

“Exactly!” Bob looked ahead. “There’s about fifty metres between each of the poles. The next one should be coming up soon.”

Shoulder to shoulder, the two walked straight ahead in a northerly direction. After a few seconds, the vertical silhouette of a power pole actually emerged from the white plumes.

“It works!” whispered Jupiter enthusiastically.

The fog had lifted a little in the meantime and visibility was now much better than it had been a few minutes ago. Shortly afterwards, they reached the second pole.

Just as they had left it behind and were expecting the houses to appear at any moment, a vicious growl sounded behind them in the immediate vicinity.

Pete froze in mid-motion. The dull glow of light at the beginning of the tunnel, which until now had served as a guide to the distance he had travelled, had suddenly gone out, as if someone had switched it off!

“Stay calm,” Pete implored himself. “Do what Jupe does—think logically! It’s probably just a loose bush that’s blown in front of the opening. I’m sure it’ll come off in a minute.”

For a while, the Second Investigator waited, but nothing happened. Finally he decided to go back to the beginning of the tunnel and open the hatch again. This would show whether the fog had lifted. If not, Pete could still continue his underground escape attempt.

In order not to lose his sense of time, he kept checking his watch on the way back.

A minute passed... Two... Three... A queasy feeling spread through Pete’s stomach. He was moving very slowly, but had it really taken him that long to get there? His pulse quickened.

Four minutes... Five... With all his might, the Second Investigator tried to keep his slowly awakening panic in check.

Six minutes... By now, thoughts were tumbling wildly around in his head. Surely the tunnel entrance could not have disappeared! Were his overstimulated senses playing tricks on him? At that moment, Pete’s fingertips touched the end of the tunnel.

“Finally!”

Now all he had to do was climb up the rungs and open the hatch. The rungs... they were no longer there! After a hasty check, he realized in disbelief that the hatch on top was no

longer there either. The entrance through which he had entered the tunnel had disappeared into thin air!

Pete found himself several metres below the earth's surface in a hermetically sealed metal cul-de-sac that quite simply could not exist!

With trembling hands, the Second Investigator looked at his compass. The realization was as clear as it was terrible—he had indeed gone back north. This had to be the starting point. Panting, Pete sank to the ground. Now the panic crept in.

Jupiter and Bob ran as fast as they could. A few seconds ago, the shadow of the third pole had flashed past them. The growling at their backs had meanwhile increased to a guttural, shrill howl. Suddenly, the huge barn rose out of the increasingly light fog.

"We're almost there!" gasped Bob. He knew that the main door was on the front of the barn, but suddenly he spotted a small side door. As quietly as possible, he opened it and the boys slipped inside, which was bathed in dim semi-darkness. Jupiter quickly closed the door and then looked around.

"Come on! We'll hide there behind those barrels!" he hissed in a whisper.

Breathless, the two investigators huddled in an alcove. They expected their pursuer to appear at the door in a few seconds and beat them, but nothing happened.

"I wonder if the creature has given up?" asked Bob quietly.

"It almost looks like it." Cautiously Jupiter stood up and listened in all directions.

"Nothing. But if that monster does lurk somewhere, we'll be safer with Mr Tornby. At least he's armed."

"You're right." Bob had now also stood up.

Jupiter's gaze had meanwhile lingered on a large shelf where there were buckets of various wall paints. Hesitantly, he went towards it.

"Come on, let's go," Bob demanded impatiently.

"Hold on, I just want to take a quick look at this," Jupiter replied with a furrowed brow.

A strange object had caught his attention. Next to the paint buckets was a strangely new-looking little box with a floral pattern, and it was not covered with dust at all. When he opened the lid, he discovered a picnic blanket, an opened box of chocolates, a half-full bottle of red wine with two glasses and a green lantern. Jupiter took it out and showed it to Bob, grinning. "Someone's set up for a little get-together here."

"Thrillingly exciting," Bob replied nervously and looked around again in all directions.

Hanging on the walls were numerous dusty farming equipment and quaint agricultural tools, the likes of which he had never seen before. On the west side of the barn, there were several large storage compartments where grain had probably been stored in the past. Now, however, they were all empty... except for one.

Bob narrowed his eyes and stood on tiptoe. There was something in the backmost compartment after all. He blinked in horror. Crouched on the floor was a creature! The bent creature seemed to be looking at something and was swaying its upper body back and forth. It had not noticed the boys until now. Gesticulating wildly, Bob told the First Investigator to be quiet. Jupiter understood instantly and stepped quietly next to his friend.

"The creature must have followed us in," he whispered, pressed. He glanced over at the side door. "Now, our way to the main door is cut off. Maybe we should just wait until..."

The creature made the decision for them. Suddenly it straightened up and slowly turned its head towards them.

Pete did not know how long he had been sitting at the bottom of the tunnel. Gradually his thoughts moved back into order. Somehow, something made the compass not work properly, there was no other explanation. So Pete figured that he had gone in the wrong direction and had now reached the end of the tunnel. If this was correct, he just had to turn around to get back to the starting point.

Swaying, Pete straightened up and began the arduous walk back. After about ten metres, he stopped abruptly and ran his fingers over the tunnel wall above him. It was surprisingly cold. It had seemed to him earlier that the temperature in the tunnel had dropped, but he had put it down to his excitement. But it was no imagination—it was getting colder and colder in the tunnel. What was going on here?

Goosebumps had formed on the Second Investigator's free forearms. Again and again, he ran his hand over the unnaturally cold wall of the tunnel, which in his imagination was already beginning to take on a coating of ice.

And something else had changed. Despite his overstimulated nerves, he noticed that the echo of his steps on the smooth metal floor now sounded different from before—louder, closer, and shuffling!

Suddenly Pete stopped. And in the same second, he wished he hadn't. The echo continued to advance towards him! Someone was following him—but how was that possible? There was a dead end behind Pete after all! But the Second Investigator had no time for further thought.

As fast as he could, he stumbled forward. The tunnel just wouldn't end. He had the terrible feeling of staggering through the inside of a huge car tyre. He covered metre after metre, but would never reach an end.

Suddenly he noticed a bluish light at his feet. The base of the tunnel had given way to a long metal grate, under which was another level. From there, the blue light rose. Pete stared down in disbelief. He couldn't make out much as he walked, but one thing was certain—this could never, ever be part of a maintenance tunnel!

Down there stretched a huge silvery room with strange superstructures on which countless points of light flashed. The Second Investigator could hardly believe his eyes. Had Hank Tornby been right after all? Was this a spaceship hidden underground from which the Topards wanted to launch their invasion?

Before Pete could finish his thought, he suddenly bumped into a massive wall.

16. A Turning Point

Just as Jupiter and Bob were about to flee, a familiar croaking voice sounded.

“What are you doing here?” Under his thick fur hat, Hank Tornby looked at the boys angrily.

“Mr Tornby! It’s you!” the First Investigator groaned with relief. “Because of your big hat, we had taken you for one of the monsters from a distance!”

“What are you doing here in the barn?” asked Bob, irritated.

The old man came over to them and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I have discovered a magnetic field fixed point back there from which I can protect my house even better against enemy radiation. I just need to find the right antenna and align it accordingly.”

“Of course, I... understand,” Jupiter replied with a suppressed smirk.

“And what are you kids doing here?” Tornby wanted to know.

“We had managed to escape the fog and fled here into the barn.” Bob explained, “but now we should quickly tell the others and look for Pete... because we seem to have lost him.”

Tornby adjusted his hat and said: “Well, let’s go!”

They had just stepped outside when a muffled call sounded from afar.

“Help! They’re after me!”

The First Investigator’s eyes widened. “That’s Pete!”

Pete couldn’t believe it—the other end of the tunnel had finally appeared. After a brief moment of daze, the Second Investigator had been able to feel rungs—a ladder to the top!

In a panic, he had climbed up the shaft, driven by the desperate hope that the access hatch would not be locked... and he had been lucky. After a short, violent shaking of the handle, he had been able to prise the hatch open with a loud groan.

As soon as he had climbed out of the metal shaft and closed the hatch, he had realized that he was barely a hundred metres from Fort Stockburn at the edge of the wheat field. The fog had disappeared.

Immediately he stormed off. “Help! They’re after me!”

Just as he stumbled into the village, Jupiter, Bob and Mr Tornby came running towards him from the barn.

“Pete! You got away!” Bob yelled.

Staggering, the Second Investigator stopped and embraced his overjoyed friends. Hastily he looked around but far and wide, there was no pursuer to be seen.

Hank Tornby patted Jupiter on the shoulder. “You should go back to the professor’s house. I’ll run to the others and let them know you’re back!”

After Pete had reported his incredible experience, Jupiter was eager to see the mysterious tunnel with his own eyes. But in the meantime, the light breeze had grown into a gusty wind that had already swirled the Second Investigator’s tracks. Since Pete could no longer remember the exact location of the hatch, the boys searched the edge of the wheat field, but in vain. Finally they started on their way back.

Shortly afterwards, The Three Investigators were sitting with Mr Brewster in his living room, refreshing themselves with ice-cold lemonade and telling each other about the incredible events of the last hour.

When they had finished, Jupe looked intently around. "So gradually the picture is coming together, but a few individual pieces are still missing."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, those are pretty big pieces," Pete replied, puzzled.

The First Investigator smiled. "Your discovery was the most important so far. Thanks to you, we now know where these 'beings' come from and where they have taken the captain."

"Do you think there's a... UFO hidden down there?" asked Pete uncertainly.

"Not at all," Jupiter replied. "This facility is definitely of human origin. When you described this large facility, I immediately thought of an underground bunker and suddenly I remembered where I have heard of the Greenbrier Resort." He turned to Bob. "To give us some clarity here, I would ask you to do some research by phone. Why don't you call the information desk and get connected to the Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia?"

"What for?" asked Bob, confused.

"Just ask about a special attraction of this resort," Jupe said. "If I'm not mistaken, we will get some important information..."

After Bob had been on the phone for several minutes taking notes, he returned excitedly to the kitchen. "It's just amazing—I'm still beside myself!"

"We can see that," Pete replied. "Tell us why!"

Bob pulled out his notebook with shining eyes. "So the Greenbrier Resort actually offers a very special attraction. Underneath this luxury resort lies an extensive bunker that can accommodate up to 1100 people! The project was completed in 1962 under the strictest secrecy. To camouflage the construction work, a new wing of the resort was built during the same period. The massively secured bunker, code-named 'Project Greek Island', was intended to provide protection for the president and the government in the event of a nuclear war. For thirty years, Project Greek Island remained one of America's best-kept secrets until the *Washington Post* published an article in 1992 exposing the project. As a result, the bunker was decommissioned."

"Wow..." Pete marvelled and looked over at Jupiter. "But how did you come up with it so suddenly?"

"As I said—the thought of a bunker, in combination with the name 'Greenbrier', suddenly rang a bell. I remembered reading the story once in the newspaper. But that's not all. The article said that after the discovery of the Greenbrier bunker, there were rumours of a second government bunker. While the Greenbrier bunker was in the East, the other, smaller bunker was supposedly in the Midwest for strategic reasons. But that could never be proven." He looked at Pete. "Then when you told me about this underground facility, it suddenly occurred to me that it might be the mysterious 'Project Greek Island II'."

The First Investigator turned to Mr Brewster. "Do you happen to know if there were any delays back in the sixties when the electricity, gas and water lines were laid?"

The professor scratched his chin. "That was before my first visit here, but I remember Frank mentioning something along those lines once. The underground work must have taken half an eternity. A couple of times, the residents even had to leave the place and sleep in a makeshift camp because of dangerous gas leaks." Mr Brewster smiled. "I remember Frank ranting about how the guys from the city were all incompetent."

“Well, the laying of the lines and pipes was just a cover for the actual work on the bunker,” Jupiter said. “I suspect, though, that the main part of the facility is quite a bit further out and only smaller ancillary components like this tunnel system are located here. Otherwise, the residents would have had to be directed out of the place for a much longer period of time.”

“That’s right. Frank said that the workers had set up quite a big camp about half a kilometre from here, with excavators and other heavy equipment,” Mr Brewster recalled. “Supposedly there had been problems with the soil, which delayed the work considerably.”

“I had already thought of something like that,” Jupiter countered. “All that was just a façade to hide the work on the bunker.”

“But why did they build the bunker in this place and so close to Fort Stockburn?” asked Pete, irritated.

“Quite simple,” replied the First Investigator. “One has used the camouflage of normality. At the Greenbrier bunker, it was the construction of a new wing and here it was the elaborate laying of water and gas pipes to a remote location on the prairie. If major construction work had simply been carried out in no man’s land over a long period of time, it would have been too conspicuous. After all, it was still the time of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.”

Bob nodded. “I see. They didn’t want to risk enemy spies becoming aware of this important military installation.”

“Exactly,” Jupiter confirmed. “Then, when the conflict was over and an exposé about the project appeared, the US government apparently abandoned not only the Greenbrier bunker, but also this South Dakota one.”

Mr Brewster looked out of the window, lost in thought. “So Mr Cobble discovered this plant recently and drew the same conclusions as you. That’s why he got hold of the Greenbrier brochure.”

“A man of his age is surely even more familiar with the Greenbrier story than I am,” the First Investigator surmised. “In any case, it is clear from the brochure that Mr Cobble has informed himself in detail about the bunker in West Virginia.”

“So the trapper is behind the fog terror?” asked Pete incredulously.

“At least he seems to be involved,” Jupiter replied. “However, he must have accomplices who are causing fear and terror as monsters. To clear up the whole matter once and for all, we should invite the remaining residents to an evening meeting.” He smiled cryptically. “That’s why I’m going to go over to Miss Daggett’s house right now and ask her not to leave just yet. Afterwards, Bob and I will extend an invitation to the others for tonight as well. Shall we say after sunset, sir?”

“Yes, after sunset is fine,” the professor replied.

“Right. I would like to use the darkness to our advantage.”

“And what do I do in the meantime?” asked Pete.

“For you, I would have the task of finding as much thin wire as possible.”

“I already know where we can look,” Mr Brewster replied.

Pete nodded. “Okay. I haven’t the faintest idea what this is all about, but I’m sure we’ll find out.”

“I promise!” replied the First Investigator with a wink. “Bob and I will make another sneaky detour to the barn then.” Jupiter’s smile widened. “I’m pretty sure we’ll be able to unmask the intimidator against Mr Brewster as well...”

17. Dark Secrets

Half an hour later, everyone had rejoined the professor. Jupiter was visibly pleased with the results of his investigation. He was equally pleased with the considerable amount of wire that Pete and Mr Brewster had obtained. Together they now discussed the First Investigator's plan and how to proceed.

Shortly after sunset, the boys went outside to take several precautions to alert them of any uninvited visitors. At nine o'clock on the dot, the guests arrived and were shown into the living room by Mr Brewster.

Only four residents had accepted the invitation. Apart from the captain, Mr Tornby was also absent, wanting to stay in his screened-off house because of the approaching Phase Three.

In the meantime, Jupiter had taken up position by the large fireplace and now stood like a teacher in front of his restless class. "If I may have your attention, you have no doubt wondered about the reason for this evening's meeting."

"You bet!" exclaimed Mr Sesto. "I hope for your sake it's a pretty good reason. Grace and I wanted to be out of here a long time ago."

"I can understand your displeasure," Jupiter replied, "but I think you will agree with me later that it is worth staying."

"Then stop rambling and get on with it!" demanded Mr Prescott impatiently.

"I'll begin now..." The First Investigator made a sweeping motion with his right hand. "First and foremost, the goal of my friends and I was to solve the eerie fog incidents that haunt Fort Stockburn. It soon became apparent, however, that in addition to this great mystery, there is another, significantly smaller dark secret in this place." He paused for a moment in art. "And that mystery is connected to the barn."

Now Miss Daggett turned pale and the corners of Mr Sesto's mouth began to twitch nervously.

"Because of its alleged dilapidation, all the residents of Fort Stockburn avoided the barn," the First Investigator continued. "All except two people who had been using this place as a meeting place for clandestine rendezvous for some time!"

"What?" Mr Prescott looked over at Jupiter in disbelief.

"That's right. When Bob and I had taken refuge in the barn this afternoon, I discovered a box on a shelf whose contents suggested romantic togetherness. Moreover, a lantern indicated that these meetings took place at night. So they were supposed to be hidden from the eyes of the other residents."

Meanwhile, Miss Daggett had begun to shift restlessly in her seat.

Bob nodded. "It was precisely this lantern that put me on the right track. I had seen two identical looking lanterns made of green glass on Miss Daggett's verandah this morning."

"So now we just had to find the other half of the pair," Pete explained.

"That part was the easiest," Bob added. "After all, it was more than striking how touchingly Mr Sesto looked after the sick Miss Daggett... and then the surprised faces when he said he wanted to leave Fort Stockburn with her."

“From that we concluded that Mr Sesto was the secret Romeo,” Jupiter added, “and until today, no one here in the village knew that Miss Daggett and he were a couple.”

He turned to Jim Sesto. “But since you’ve sort of revealed the secret yourself today, I’m sure you’ll forgive us for addressing it directly now.”

“You darn brats!” the blacksmith snapped.

“We will come back to your reaction in a moment,” Jupiter replied. “But first I would like to hear from Miss Daggett why all this secrecy was necessary. There was nothing standing in the way of a new relationship. After all, Mr Sesto is single and you are divorced.”

“I’m not,” muttered Miss Daggett.

“What do you mean?” asked Mr Prescott excitedly. “I thought you said you and Dave got divorced—an amicable separation.”

Miss Daggett sighed. “Yes, but that’s not true. There have been problems between Dave and me for a long time and three months ago he found out that I was secretly seeing Jim. As a result, he immediately moved out and went to live with his brother in Cleveland. He hasn’t agreed to a divorce yet because he won’t let me go.”

“So strictly speaking you are not Miss Daggett, you are still Mrs Loomis,” Bob stated.

“That’s right.” Miss Daggett bowed her head. “But no one was supposed to know that... and because so many in the village were friends with my husband, I was determined to keep it a secret that Jim and I were to be blamed for the break-up.”

“That’s why it was too risky for you to meet at home,” the professor added. “So you opted for the late-night appointments in the barn.”

Miss Daggett nodded.

“So that’s the barn secret solved,” Jupiter stated with satisfaction. “Now we come to the resolution of who is behind the hostile actions against Mr Brewster. Here again the shelf was most revealing. You see, next to the said box are several buckets of wall paint, including green, blue and red.”

He turned back to the mantelpiece and picked up another item. “One shelf down I found this red-smeared brush wrapped in an old rag. In addition, there were minimal traces of paint also on the lid of Miss Daggett and Mr Sesto’s box.”

Pete took out the side mirror that had been painted red. “It’s exactly the same colour as the projectile someone used to smash the professor’s living room window yesterday.”

“The colour, by the way, was purely a red herring to throw suspicion on the red-fixated Mr Tornby,” Jupiter added. “That alone might not be conclusive enough... but what follows is further evidence that none other than the lovely Miss Daggett and the energetic Mr Sesto are responsible for the acts of intimidation against Mr Brewster. The target of all these actions was a valuable piece of jewellery belonging to the late Mr Malvey.”

“Miss Daggett knew the jewellery, of course, and knew it had to be somewhere in this house,” Bob continued. “After Mr Malvey’s death, it was easy for her, as a direct neighbour, to go in and out of this house without arousing suspicion.”

“In reality, the good Miss Daggett only wanted to find the pendant, but Mr Malvey had hidden it well,” Pete added. “She searched the whole house but only found his diary and took it with her.”

“How... do you know about that?” asked Miss Daggett in surprise.

“For an investigator, a good eye is at least as important as a quick mind,” Bob replied with a grin.

Jupiter nodded. “Undoubtedly. Thanks to Bob’s powers of observation, we knew that you had possession of the diary. But you obviously didn’t find the clues you were hoping for, so you had to keep looking. When Mr Brewster suddenly moved into this house, you naturally

saw your beautiful plan threatened... but you didn't think of giving up. First, you tried to worm your way into the professor's affections so that you could continue to have access to the house."

"But that didn't work out as hoped," Bob added. "Then, when the first fog incidents occurred, you sensed a new opportunity and, together with Mr Sesto, launched a scapegoating campaign against the professor. In reality, you both just wanted him out of the house."

"Unbelievable," muttered the old trapper.

"But Mr Brewster was not intimidated and stayed." Jupiter looked Miss Daggett straight in the eye. "To make matters worse, you then learned from him that he wanted to bring the three of us here. So of course you had to act."

"... And that was with a phone call from your friend Mr Sesto, who pretended to be the professor and tried to take the job away from us." Bob folded his arms. "That Mr Sesto was the fake Brewster, I could have realized this morning when I heard him say the word 'brat'. That's exactly the same word he used in the phone call to us."

"The second call also undoubtedly came from him," Jupiter joined in. "As a technical expert from Fort Stockburn, it was no difficulty for him to make an audio recording of the screams. He then used this on the phone to intimidate us. To top off the drama, he added the shaman's threat at the end, which he knew as well as anyone in the village."

With an incredulous expression, Mr Prescott turned to the blacksmith. "Is all this true?"

Pete glared hostilely at Mr Sesto. "You bet! Then, for good measure, you sent us another message the next day with the strange word 'Topards' in it." Bob nodded. "Unlike the professor, of course, you knew the name of Mr Tornby's alien. If we were to come to Fort Stockburn and investigate anyway, you knew that suspicion would automatically fall on Mr Tornby."

Mr Sesto had been slumped in his chair for the past few minutes. He looked down at the floor while holding Miss Daggett's hand.

"I'm... really sorry about all this," he murmured, barely audible. "I just wanted to be there for my Grace."

"I too... would like to apologize," Miss Daggett whispered. Tears shimmered in her eyes. "I know we have done wrong. To you, Professor, and to you too, boys. I was just so infatuated with the beautiful gemstone..."

Mr Brewster smiled weakly. "At least that I can understand, even if I have no sympathy whatsoever for your other behaviour."

Now Jupiter took the floor again. "Now that Miss Daggett and Mr Sesto have confessed their misdeeds, let us turn to Mr Prescott. We actually have to apologize to him twice—firstly, because we briefly thought he was responsible for the threats against Mr Brewster because of his rust-proofing paint; and secondly, because I thought he was trying to lure us away from the scene of Mr Hold's disappearance with his monster sighting, when in fact he had seen the creature."

"Of course I had!" the farmer affirmed energetically. "There was a big shaggy figure scratching at Grace's door."

"We are convinced of that by now," replied the First Investigator. "It was not you who wanted to distract us, but the creature. The victim, Miss Daggett, was chosen at random. The creature was meant to frighten her to such an extent that she finally left the place, because with her, the extremely defensive Mr Sesto would also leave."

Miss Daggett's eyes widened in surprise. "What? I don't understand..."

"Let's put it this way—the person who instigated this action has a very fine instinct and has known for a long time that you and Mr Sesto are a couple. You could also call it the

extraordinarily good instinct of a hunter!” Jupiter let a tense look roam over the group. “Now here is the point where we leave the little secrets of this place behind us and devote ourselves to the great mystery of the fog horror. For one of the initiators of these spectacular incidents is none other than the friendly trapper Samuel Cobble!”

“You?” Mr Sesto roared, leaped up with the agility of a predatory cat, only to be stopped with difficulty by Pete and the professor from lunging at Mr Cobble. The blacksmith’s hand rested on the handle of a large Bowie knife.

In the trapper’s gaze, however, was exhaustion rather than aggressiveness. “How did you find out?” he asked with genuine surprise.

“The brochure with the Greenbrier Resort gave you away,” the First Investigator replied, “and the conspicuous way with which you tried to hide it.”

“Greenbrier?” asked Mr Prescott. “What is that?”

Jupiter smiled. “I’ll spare you the details, but the gist of it is about a disused government bunker in West Virginia.”

Miss Daggett tilted her head in irritation. “And what does that bunker have to do with us?”

“Nothing at all,” Bob replied with a grin. “But there’s a second bunker that the public didn’t know about until now.”

“... And this bunker is here, close by. I saw it with my own eyes.” Pete said and pointed out of the window.

Jupiter turned to the trapper again. “And sometime not too long ago you discovered this bunker.”

“That’s right,” Mr Cobble admitted. “I was hunting and suddenly came across a hidden hatch in the ground. A shaft led to a long tunnel that eventually opened into a huge underground facility. It was just incredible.”

“What I find much more incredible is what followed, and for which I still have no explanation.” The First Investigator looked at the trapper seriously. “For some reason, you made a plan to use this facility and its technical capabilities to evict the residents of Fort Stockburn. But why? Do you feel a hatred for the people? You said that you have been closer to nature than to people, but that doesn’t justify the terror that you and your accomplices had created!”

“It’s not really like that,” Cobble replied haltingly. “The whole thing wasn’t my idea, it was—”

At that moment, Miss Daggett shrieked out. “Oh no! Look!”

Trembling with fear, she pointed to the windows, where on the outside, several hulking monstrous figures had appeared as if from nowhere. They stared into the living room with piercing predatory eyes. The white fangs in their wide open mouths glinted in the moonlight.

18. The Fog Goes Away

“It’s true—the whole thing wasn’t his my dad’s idea, it was mine!” it resounded from the suddenly opened front door. A beefy man in his early forties stood on the doorstep with his arms folded. He had rasp-short red hair and wore black overalls, gloves and heavy boots. A gun holster was clearly visible on his belt.

“Mike...” the old trapper gasped.

While the supposed creatures began to remove their gruesome masks, Cobble junior lifted a piece of wire into the air. “Nice idea with the trip hazards around the house, guys—but we’re professionals.”

“Darn, I didn’t expect that,” Jupiter hissed softly.

Mr Sesto stood up threateningly, but Mike Cobble was not impressed.

“Nobody makes a wrong move around here, or crazy Tornby gets it dirty, you understand?”

“What have you done to him?” asked Mr Prescott in dismay.

“Nothing yet. He’s sedated in the bunker with the captain. But if you don’t hurry, I’ll send one of my boys down and it’ll be uncomfortable for them.”

Jupiter took a deep breath and took a step forward. “Since you are now in an all-round superior position, surely you can tell us what all this is about.”

“Why should I?” asked Cobble junior with an arrogant grin.

“What would you have to fear?” The First Investigator gestured around the room. “Or are you perhaps afraid of a couple of senior citizens and three young adults?”

The redhead took a few steps towards Jupiter as if he was about to grab him, but then he stopped and smiled grimly. “You know what? You’re right, kid. I actually have nothing to fear. Because when we’re done here, my boys and I are going to take off for Mexico. So let’s have a little chat...” His grin widened. “... As compensation, so to speak, for the inconvenience you’re in for.”

Jupiter appeared unimpressed. “We are curious.”

Cobble junior pointed to his father. “Three weeks ago, my dad called me for the first time in ages and told me about a strange giant bunker in the middle of the prairie. He knows I was in the Marines and know a lot about military technology. So he asked me to take a look and tell him if there was any danger to nature. He had kept his find a secret from the others and I impressed upon him to continue to do so.”

“Because you sensed something big behind it,” Bob surmised.

“Exactly. I drove down here, had Dad show me the facility and I almost freaked out. There are priceless material down there!”

“You mean... weapons?” asked Miss Daggett, who had nestled anxiously against Mr Sesto.

“No, all the weapon technology was removed when the bunker was decommissioned, of course, but most of the furniture and communication systems are still there. Collectors pay a fortune for that, not to mention the rest of the material you can get out of there. Add it all up and we’re looking at a few hundred thousand dollars.”

"I... I don't understand." The old trapper had turned deathly pale. "I thought you said we were doing all this to preserve nature."

"Well, somehow I had to convince you to help me drive these people away. After all, I needed a local insider for that."

"What did you tell your father?" Bob wanted to know.

"In the bunker, I found material about the Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia, among other things. When I read up on it later, I learned that parts of the bunker there can be visited as a tourist attraction."

"I see," Jupiter replied. "You showed your father a brochure of the Greenbrier Resort and persuaded him that a tourist rush would also start here in Fort Stockburn if the existence of this second bunker came out."

The redhead nodded mockingly. "Dad is so unworldly, I could tell him the most absurd things—about huge hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, highways..."

"That's a real nightmare for your nature-loving father," Bob added, embarrassed.

"Right, and it was precisely with this nightmare that I was able to convince him that the people from Fort Stockburn would have to disappear. After all, sooner or later one of them would also come across the bunker."

"You monster!" breathed Mr Cobble in shock.

"But a very clever monster," his son replied. "Once you realized we had to drive the people away, you were a huge help. The idea of using the Indian fog curse to panic people was just fabulous."

"Disgusting fool," Mr Prescott muttered angrily.

"How exactly did you manage all this?" Jupiter wanted to know.

"After I had gained an overview of the available technology down there, the rest was just a matter of practice," Mike Cobble said. "This bunker, in fact, had a sophisticated ground-to-air defence system, which I was able to partially reactivate after a few repairs. At its heart was a widely ramified system of tubes that could be used to eject artificial surface fog at countless positions in an area of five square kilometres."

"After the first remote tests, I was ecstatic. The guys back then must have developed some novel process. Anyway, this fog is denser and more compact than anything I have ever seen before. And best of all, by means of a perfectly tuned ventilation system, you can even move the fog banks around and have them blow away again as quickly as you like!"

"We experienced that for ourselves earlier," Pete replied darkly. "And the underground tunnels are probably also equipped with lots of technical gadgets."

"The sudden dead end was pretty cool, wasn't it?" asked Mike Cobble, amused. "The nice thing about locks is that you can open them and close them again."

"That's why someone could appear behind me out of nowhere," muttered the Second Investigator.

"True, but we didn't expect you to cover the distance at Olympic speed. You were just too fast for us." Cobble junior pointed behind him. "Speaking of 'us', after I got comfortable with the technique, I caught up with my team. A while back I went into business for myself with some friends from my old squad and started a private security service in Rapid City. It did not go very well though, so this bunker goldmine came at just the right time!"

"From then on, you and your team terrorized the residents," Mr Brewster concluded, stunned.

Cobble junior nodded. "I was in charge of the fog and my buddies were in charge of the monster attacks. Each of them wore a loudspeaker on their body through which the

electronically distorted screams were played. As soon as someone else entered the fog, they turned off the screams so they could stalk undetected.”

“How did you even get your bearings in the fog?” asked Bob.

“Simple,” one of the disguised men replied, taking out a device from inside his mask that looked like miniature binoculars. “Each of us wears infra-red vision devices under our masks. Useful souvenirs from our unit. The field of view is limited, but perfectly adequate for our purposes.”

Mike nodded. “And to make the demon costumes look deceptively real, Dad helped us rework them.” Again a cheeky grin flitted across his face. “He knows his way around skins, after all.”

“Your lousy plan worked perfectly at first,” Jupiter summarized. “The people got scared to death and fled one by one.”

The redhead’s expression darkened. “Yes, but not all of them. A stubborn core just wouldn’t disappear... and then you came along too! So of course we had to step it up a notch.”

Bob nodded. “So that’s what you did... and you even didn’t shy away from abduction!”

“How could you actually make the captain disappear without us finding the hatch afterwards?” asked Pete.

“The entrances and exits can be lowered hydraulically and have a sophisticated nozzle system. This allows parts of the surrounding soil to be sucked in within seconds and ejected again via the hatches.”

“This way they become as good as invisible,” Mr Brewster marvelled, “especially if you don’t know the exact place where you have to dig.”

Miss Daggett glanced nervously over at Mike Cobble. “So... what’s going to happen to the captain and Hank Tornby and... us?”

Cobble junior laughed derisively. “Well, first we’re going down to the bunker. We’ll find a dark place for all of you there... and you’ll stay there until we’ve finished plundering the bunker. But don’t worry: there’s plenty of canned food down there!”

“There will also be canned food for you in prison!” it sounded from behind.

The redhead and his team whirled around and looked in horror into the muzzle of a double-barrelled shotgun held by a young man with striking features. Next to him stood the imposing taxi driver Jerry Daggett, pointing a gun at the monster squad.

“Martin Ishniak!” Jupiter exclaimed enthusiastically when he recognized the newcomer.

“Yes, the one and only,” Martin replied with a grin.

Within moments, the villains were overpowered and tied up. Immediately, Mr Brewster rushed to his niece’s husband and hugged him tightly. The Three Investigators also greeted their saviour warmly, while Miss Daggett fell around her nephew’s neck.

Martin was still smiling like a honey-cake horse. “I couldn’t possibly let you down, Uncle Arnold. You only hinted on the phone a few days ago that something was going on, but I suspected it must be something serious.”

“When I found out you were in the middle of your final exam, I didn’t want to burden you,” Mr Brewster replied, touched.

“I thought of something like that,” Martin said. “Well, anyway, I completed and passed my presentation this morning—eleven o’clock to be exact—and right after that, I took the next plane to Rapid City and got here with Mr Daggett. We already know each other because he’s the only one who travels this route.”

“But why didn’t we hear you coming?” asked Pete, confused.

Martin winked. "These 'specialists' here are not the only ones who can sneak up on you." He pointed out into the darkness. "After all, I didn't know what to expect. To have the element of surprise on my side, I had Mr Daggett keep a wide berth in front of the place. I then stalked from there. When I saw an armed shaggy patrolling the street, I knew you were in danger. After subduing the guard and taking the shotgun from him, I returned to the taxi, from where Mr Daggett radioed the police, but he was told that the sheriff and several officers were already on their way here."

"I had already informed them beforehand," Jupiter explained with a smile. "It was clear to me that it would come to a decision tonight."

"I thought you'd taken precautions," Martin replied appreciatively. "Anyway, Mr Daggett and I then followed the voices that led us here—just in time, it seems."

"You could say that," Pete confirmed.

A grin flitted across Bob's face. "How ironic that a bunch of fake Indian demons end up being overpowered by a real Indian."

"An Indian with a doctorate to boot!" added Jupiter, beaming and patting Martin on the shoulder. "But before we tell you the whole adventure with the screaming fog, we have to free the captain and Mr Tornby."

Together with the old trapper, who showed them the main access to the bunker, The Three Investigators, Mr Brewster, Martin and the last residents of Fort Stockburn descended into the underground tunnel. Only Jerry Daggett stayed upstairs to keep Mike Cobble and his team at bay. Besides, he didn't feel like climbing stairs.

After crossing several gleaming steel corridors, they heard the captain's booming voice cursing. They followed the ranting and finally reached a huge room equipped from floor to ceiling with tons of technological devices and dozens of monitors. Apparently it was the bunker's surveillance centre. On the opposite side was a partitioned cell where maintenance equipment used to be stored. Cobble junior had obviously converted the lockable room into a prison.

When the trapper opened the door, Mr Hold stormed out with his head high and gesticulating wildly in the air. "An impertinence! That's no way to treat an officer! Where are these cowardly jackals? I'll teach them a lesson they won't forget all their lives!"

While the others tried to calm the frantic captain, Jupiter glanced over at the surprisingly calm Hank Tornby. The 'Topardian Prophet', who had apparently just woken up, turned devoutly in a circle and hissed again and again: "I knew it! I always knew it!"